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Dominican Identity in Flux: Media Consumption, Negotiation, and Afro-Caribbean Subjectivity in the U.S.

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Dominican Identity in Flux: Media Consumption, Negotiation, and Afro-Caribbean Subjectivity in the U.S.

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This dissertation uses U.S. media as a lens to interpret the identity negotiation practices among Dominican-Americans and Dominicans living in the U.S. in the struggle to maintain an identification that is distinct from both pan-ethnic *latinidad* and blackness. Not appropriately hailed by either category, those that are of both Latino and African heritages must attempt to negotiate and position themselves within racialized discourses that place "Black" and "Latino" as mutually exclusive categories, discourses that simultaneously privilege these categories above other forms of identification that would be more salient for U.S. Dominican communities, namely nationality or cultural heritage. As a result, those with a Dominican/Dominican-American subjectivity are challenged to find representations that reflect their racial, ethnic, and national identities, often negotiating an identification with images that do

not accommodate their regularly ignored *dominicanidad*. Therefore, my dissertation is framed by the question: what are the ways Dominicans navigate U.S. mediated and discursive landscapes of identity and how are they negotiating U.S. media and the representations they include?

Through a combination of traditional fieldwork conducted in New York City, a critical cultural study, and internet reception study, this dissertation seeks to give voice to those who are experiencing identity in flux. Not only does such a project address a U.S. population that is often ignored and marginalized within the scholarly literature, it attempts to complicate identity negotiation processes within the U.S. more broadly. Rooted in the contention that *dominicanidad* is uniquely positioned to potentially challenge U.S. hegemonic racial ideology, my dissertation will provide two critical interventions into the field of Latina/o Media Studies: (1) it offers an exploration of the mediated representation and discourses contributing to a highly negotiated process of identification among Dominicans and Dominican-Americans, and (2) it reveals a more intimate and contested relationship between blackness and *latinidad* based on how they are imbedded within articulations of *dominicanidad*. Ultimately, my project illuminates how the negotiated usage of various media (such as television, films, and websites) by Dominicans in the U.S. plays a significant role within a fluctuating understanding of *dominicanidad*.

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Introduction: Ethnoracial Discourses and *dominicanidad*

> *I personally have a lot of respect for Felix [Sanchez]. I'll always remember 8 years ago when he participated in the games and won gold for the first time, the WHOLE country was paralized (sic) watching him run on tv (sic). I was working in a bank at that point and both tellers and customers stopped what they were doing to cheer him on. When in the history of the DR have you seen anything similar? By Representing the DR, he's doing his DOMINICAN parents' heritage honor and at the same time inspiring generations of young dominicans (sic) into training and going for their dreams. I say kudos to Felix and may he continue to wear the bandera dominicana proudly for a long time to come (poster DR1.com).*

Félix Sánchez, a U.S.-born and trained Olympic runner, decided that instead of representing the country of his birth in the Olympics that he would run for the country of his parents: the Dominican Republic (DR). While he is in many ways the epitome of the "American Dream,"[1] this successful athlete chose to be an emblem of Dominican

[1] The term "American Dream" is a contested one that is rooted in constructs of normative whiteness, exclusive American nationality, revisionist history, and the marginalization of non-European immigrant

pride rather than fall in line with the thousands of U.S. athletes who no longer feel a strong sense of connection to the country from which their families immigrated. I remember seeing Félix during the Olympic coverage, with a picture of his *abuela* pinned to his competition number and his *machista* bravado and thinking to myself, "yes, this guy is ALL Dominican." To find out later that he was born and raised in the U.S. of Dominican-born parents only re-affirmed to me what I have believed all along about Dominicans in the U.S.: they not only prioritize a retained connection with those they know on the island, but they fundamentally identify as Dominican no matter where they physically live in the diaspora. Moreover, I believe that it is shared consumption of media that facilitates and sustains this trans-national Dominican identity.

The above vignette exhibits five aspects of the goal of this dissertation: the vignette (1) demonstrates the ways in which Dominican-American identification retains allegiance to the DR as more than merely an origin of heritage and emphasizes the significance and span of the Dominican imaginary within the U.S., (2) gestures towards the embodied nature of *dominicanidad* in terms of ethnoracial performativity and presumed Dominican cultural authenticity, (3) speaks to the impact of media in establishing diasporic Dominican identification, (4) directly attests to the ways media is transnationally consumed and essential to maintaining shared identification across

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groups. Stemming from the industrial revolution, it is a concept that is steeped in the hegemony of capitalism and the problematic assumption that the U.S. is a meritocracy.

migration flows, and (5) highlights the importance of media in sustaining *dominicanidad* regardless of geographic location or national citizenship.

Coming from a background in anthropology, I focused my Masters research on those on the island itself and the cultural impact of media. Yet, over the course of my fieldwork stint in the Dominican Republic during the summer of 2008, it seemed all people wanted to talk to me about was the U.S. Yes, there was an election coming up, and they did ask me questions about it, but mostly people just wanted to talk about the people they knew who lived in the U.S., the times they had been there, and plans they had for working or going to school there. My positionality as a *gringa* [white American] U.S. anthropologist aside, there was a lot more to their desire to discuss the U.S. with me. This curiosity was rooted in the historical connection Dominicans have with the U.S., their circular migration pattern back and forth, and the open dialogue and cultural exchange they sustain with those in the Dominican diaspora.

Sitting in a Dominican living room, watching a U.S. television channel that was broadcasting a U.S. baseball game, I repeatedly had pointed out to me which new players who came up to bat were, in fact, Dominican (and there were many). As I asked questions about the Dominican players, the Dominican family I was living with would ask me questions about the U.S. commercials that would air during the breaks in the game. It was not until the game was almost over that I realized that an unassuming night-in ended up becoming one of the most revealing experiences of my entire fieldwork. As satellites transmit New York-based

Dominican television stations onto the island and Dominican-based stations transmit to New York, Dominicans in all parts of the diaspora take to the internet to stream media content, connect, reminisce, and sustain their cultural identity. It is through media that Dominicans, no matter where they are located, are able to establish a contact zone, a cultural bridge, and an avenue for both preserving and challenging their identities.[2] Clearly, Dominicans on the island are not only interested in, but fully invested in, those Dominican communities off the island. This project is an answer to all those conversations I had about my own country while fully submerged in another. Dominicans in the U.S. are just as fiercely Dominican as those on the island, and what's more, because of what they watch, surf, and listen to are as connected with that island reality as they are with the streets of Washington Heights.

Poetics aside, Dominicans, and other Afro-Caribbeans in the U.S., struggle to maintain an identification that is distinct from both panethnic *latinidad* and blackness as defined in the U.S. Not appropriately hailed by either category, those who are of both Latino and African heritage when in the U.S. must attempt to negotiate and position themselves within a racialized system that fundamentally has no room for them. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (2010) suggest that even the term "Afro-Latino" is confusing to those in the U.S. "because we are accustomed to thinking of 'Afro' and 'Latino' as distinct from each other and mutually exclusive: one is either Black or Latino"

[2] Here I build on the scholarship of Michael Kearney (1995), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Nigel Thrift's (1997), Allen Chun (2001), Louisa Schein's (2002), Michael Curtin (2007), and Juan Flores (2009).

(1). Furthermore, the various U.S. English media avenues and industries mis- and under-represent Afro-Latina/os in a way that marginalizes their identities and shapes the way mainstream U.S. society reads their racialization. Representations of Afro-Latinos are extremely rare in U.S. mass media and regularly limited to certain narrative locations (New York City for example). In Spanish-language media such representations, while sustaining a more visible presence, are secondary, limited, and "negative," usually seen in their positioning as background characters or domestics in *telenovelas*, the trivializing of Hispanic Caribbean interests in news coverage, and an almost total lack of cultural representation based in *afrolatinidades*. As a result, those with an Afro-Latino subjectivity are challenged to find representations that reflect their racial, ethnic, and national identities, often having to negotiate an identification with images that do not accommodate for their regularly ignored *latinidad*.

Therefore, my dissertation investigates how Dominicans, and other Afro-Caribbeans, are navigating this reality and how media texts and the representations they include are influencing how they negotiate the U.S. racial landscape. Structured by the results of my fieldwork and online reception studies, the span of the media analyzed in this dissertation is primarily contemporary (media that has been produced in the last 20 years or so) but multi-medium. Interviewees included references to television, film, print media, along with internet and other new media. In order to make this range of media more manageable, I focus in this dissertation specifically on Dominican star/celebrity texts, the MTV

Dominican-American-centric reality show *Washington Heights*, and a handful of websites targeting the Dominican-American community as their primary audience. Not only does such a project address a population in the U.S. that often is ignored and marginalized within the literature, but it complicates mediated ethnoracial identity negotiation processes within the U.S. more broadly. A project that is both highly positioned in New York City (NYC) while at the same time diasporic, I conducted a triangulated study—an approach that looks to provide more dynamic understanding by making the research multi-methodological—to address how these negotiations are unfolding.

It is easy enough to argue that my scholarship is both valuable and addresses gaps in the literature based on the simple fact that so few scholars are doing work on U.S.-based *dominicanidad*, especially in media studies. However, the argument that "nobody else is studying it" is not adequate reasoning in of itself to devote one's research to a topic. The reason I do research on/with Dominicans, and the same reason it baffles me why so few do the same, is that I find *dominicanidad* uniquely positioned to potentially challenge racial ideology both in the U.S. (instructive of mainstream racial constructions *and* Dominican-American identification) and on the island through diasporic Dominican engagement with island-based racial structures. An emerging sense of *afrodominicanidad* and discourses of nationality that acknowledge African descent in new and shifting ways can now be observed in several aspects of Dominican culture both in the DR and its diaspora.

Furthermore, while the Dominican diaspora spans much of the globe, it is in the U.S. that *dominicanidad* becomes most critically challenged and negotiated. Based partly on the dominance of Hollywood media imagery globally and the relatively large Dominican population within the U.S., the role of U.S.-based ethnoracial discourses within the negotiation of *dominicanidad* has a significant, observable, and trans-national impact.

Some might ask, can't issues of *afrolatinidad* and media representation be addressed by focusing on either Puerto Rico or Cuba, as there is already a breadth of research for those Afro-Caribbean islands, and my answer would be: not really. Not only must Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman's (1997) notion of *latinidades*—which acknowledges the diversity and hybridity among those homogenized through the construction of pan-ethnic Latino/Hispanic identification—be taken into account, but each island has a unique history with the U.S., their previous Spanish colonizers, and relationship to each other and the rest of the islands of the Caribbean. While there are most certainly several similarities—there is no denying that connections can be made between the three islands and one can potentially use the same theoretical framework to address all three—as will be discussed further in this dissertation, the DR has uniquely positioned itself in opposition to blackness in a way that is not replicated anywhere else. And while a handful of scholars do address relationships of *latinidad* to blackness, it is usually done either in a way that merely briefly acknowledges that there are in fact Afro-Latina/o people and/or by emphasizing the in-between status of *latinidad*

within what is constructed as a White/Black racial binary.[3] Furthermore, several scholars offer analysis on Latin American and Spanish Caribbean-based systems of racialization that are grounded in a spectrum structure and are overall less dependent on phenotype and more dependent on class in terms of social stratification.[4] However, these are not studies of media representation or consumption. Moreover, it is these same scholars who suggest, as a promising research topic (just not one they want to take on), looking at how these fundamentally different structures engage and interact with U.S. racial thinking. Therefore, my dissertation will provide two critical interventions into the field of Latina/o media studies: the first is to offer an exploration of the mediated representation and discourses contributing to a highly negotiated process of identification among Dominicans and Dominican-Americans, and the second is to reveal a more intimate and contested relationship between blackness and *latinidad* based on how it is imbedded within articulations of *dominicanidad* in American popular media. Ultimately, my dissertation illuminates how the negotiated usage of various media (such as television, films, and websites) by Dominicans in the U.S. plays a significant role within a fluctuating understanding of *dominicanidad*.

In order to support this assertion, my dissertation is rooted in both qualitative interviews with Dominican Americans living in the Dominican communities of New York City and site-specific fieldwork in these neighborhoods, as well as positioned within the

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[3] See Kimberly E. Simmons (2008), Mary Beltrán (2008 & 2009), and Priscilla Pena Ovalle (2011).

[4] See Carol A. Smith (1996), Arlene Dávila (1998), Silvio Torres-Saillant (1998), David Howard (2001), Ernesto Sagás (2000), and Isar P. Godreau (2006).

internet spaces in which Dominicans participate. Examining media reception and negotiation through engaging directly with Dominicans in the U.S., I reveal those articulations of ethnoracial identity embedded in a diaspora sustained through mediation. Through a critical cultural and reception study that investigates the consumption and interpretation practices of Dominican-Americans, an online reception study elucidating the discourses involved in negotiating U.S.-based *dominicanidad*, and a critical and textual analysis of those media texts that were mentioned by my study participants as having particular resonance in relation to their identity as Dominicans/Dominican Americans, I unveil the role of media consumption practices and various media in the ways in which *dominicanidad* is interpreted and experienced. Specifically, I will look at how the different and mutually contesting constructions of ethnoracial identity that are found in the U.S. versus the DR become part of Dominican-American negotiations of media consumption, representation, interpretation, and identification. Framing the dissertation are the following research questions:

1. What types of media texts are Dominicans in the U.S. consuming, talking about, relating too, and are critical of?
2. How do Dominican-Americans interpret representations of (or the lack of) Dominicans in popular culture, and are there certain representations of either *latinidad* or blackness they relate to more saliently?
3. What role do racialized media representations have in their individual negotiations of self and how do they operate across diasporic networks?

This introduction chapter reviews the various literatures informing the overall project, which include those on Latino identity, Latina/o media studies, critical cultural

studies, and ethnographic and reception studies. By initially discussing the role of media as a force within our contemporary globalized world, I position Dominicans in the U.S. as part of a wider network of migration flows and diasporic trajectories. Building on the scholarship that contextualizes transnational ideological flows, I situate the Dominican experience within a brief analysis of ethnoracial discourses relevant to the Dominican context, most importantly those of *mestizaje* and national identification. I then move on to discuss the various discourses that contribute to Dominican-American subjectivities and how they become filtered through the media. The final section of my literature review looks directly at the work of Diaspora studies scholars and puts them in dialogue with scholars who are problematizing the paradigms that dominate the field to suggest that these paradigms are unable to account for Caribbean diasporic trends as multi-directional and multi-locational. After a thorough review of the literature, I explain the dissertation's methodology. I contend that combining critical cultural studies approaches with reception study and textual and discourse analysis is the most effective and revealing approach to get to the heart of how discourses are being negotiated among the Dominican community in the U.S. and how media consumption plays a significant role in these processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a dissertation firmly rooted in the everyday realities of trans-national and diasporic identity, I ground my research

in the theoretical scholarship of scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, Nigel Thrift, and Benedict Anderson who combine media studies with a cultural studies approach. My dissertation looks to illuminate the deep and personal experiences of everyday people in their engagement with and interpretation of those media texts that inform their daily realities. *Dominicanidad*, as a construct rooted in nationhood, is a phenomenon that is personal, local, and translocal; it signifies in a contextual and political way. Moreover, a notion of a Dominican "imagined community," based on shared media consumption, facilitates legitimate discursive struggle and active negotiation.

In order to frame my scholarship on Dominican diasporic mediated discourses of identity, I contend that Ajurn Appadurai's "scapes" theorization is the most salient framework to analyze diaspora. Appadurai's much cited *Modernity at Large* (1996) provides the backbone for much of the current scholarship on globalization and attests to the complexities of transnational flows in a manner that was both highly interventionalist and foundational to scholarships of global media, diaspora, anthropology, and cultural studies. While his work is not without its critique, it has survived relatively uncontested since its publication almost two decades ago. Appadurai sees the globalizing world as one in which collectivities are in a state of flux, facilitated by the processes of deterritorialization and mass mediation. Postulating that the phenomenon of global flows in the modern world is a newly interactive system no longer sustained through a grounded connection to territory but a "rhizomic" one, he establishes his now famous framework

of global "scapes": ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. Rather than with *explosions*, the globalizing world reacts to the tensions and conflicts caused by culturalist flows through different *implosions*. Such post-national implosions are a direct reflection of the reality of modern ethnicity that challenge both the validity of the national state as well as patriotism. Appadurai asserts that it is in the production of locality (or translocalism) within a deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational world that "electronic media are transforming the relationships between information and mediation" (1996: 189). Taking this approach is consistent with the type of methodology I will propose while at the same time it pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally considered "the field." As a diasporic media studies research project that fundamentally challenges geographically-oriented fieldwork, I draw on those scholars who seek to both deconstruct dichotomies of global/local and assume a more web-like conception of social, cultural, and structural connections among people and flows of media across the world. As a community that is neglected by other diaspora studies scholars, Dominicans on the island and in the diaspora can be better theorized within the framework of "scapes" than that of Pual Gilroy's "Black Atlantic," for example.

As this dissertation is highly interdisciplinary in nature, my literature review will reflect that. In order to assess the role(s) media play within negotiations and articulations of *dominicanidad* among Dominicans in the U.S., the literatures focused on Latina/o media representation and

notions of *latinidad*, Dominican and Afro-Caribbean racial politics, and diaspora studies all inform my analysis. Each part of this literature review relate to each other in critical ways due to the contested and negotiated reality of Dominican identification while in the U.S. I investigate U.S.-based notions of panethnic *latinidad*, Dominican navigation of traditional constructions of racial identity, and shifting identification that is the result of the web-like nature of diasporic life. My scholarship puts these distinct literatures in dialogue with each other, providing an interdisciplinary bridge that not only addresses Dominican identities but is an intervention that both complicates and problematizes each set of literatures by connecting pivotal positions of each discipline with what I consider the unique ethnoracial positionality of Dominicans at home and abroad. Furthermore, by situating these literatures as the foundation of a media studies-based project, I am able to expand on them in ways that address the influential role of mediated discourses and media consumption.

Mestizaje **and Dominican Ethnoracial Heritage**

When addressing ethnoracial identity formation within the Dominican Republic and its influence on identity negotiations among Dominicans in the U.S. one must be able to understand their complex system of racial identification. As in the case of much of the Caribbean and Latin America in general, racial classification is a system of shades or skin tones (Simmons 2005). Unlike the racial set-up in the United States, in which you fit into a white or non-white

categorization, or what has been termed the "one-drop rule," understandings of race in the Caribbean, and therefore the Dominican Republic, operates on a spectrum of colors that contribute to how you are racialized as well as identified.

This spectrum is predicated on a dominant notion of a mixed identity. Specifically, the Dominican Republic has three main ethnic contributors: Spanish, Indigenous, and African. Although much of the indigenous population was wiped out due to enslavement and European diseases, they inter-mixed and married both Spanish colonizers as well as enslaved and free Africans. All three of these populations, overtime, lead to a majority population comprised of ethnoracially mixed peoples, which is still the case in contemporary Dominican society.

Mestizaje, or the process of racial mixing that occurred in the Caribbean, produced individuals that were labeled *mestizo*. Carol Smith (1996) describes this process:

> *Mestizaje* consists of at least three distinct, but related, processes: 1) the social processes (including rape, concubinage, marriage, inheritance and legitimation) used to procreate, socialize, and position people of mixed biological heritage (i.e., various combinations of Spanish, Indian, and African); 2) the personal identification of an individual or community—criollo, Indian, African, or actual biological "*mestizo*"—with *mestizo* communities or the *mestizo* national subject (which are two different things); 3) a political discourse in which people (subaltern actors as well as intellectuals) argue about the racial, cultural, and political character of the *mestizo* in relation to other identity types (defined by the same kind of criteria) and what should be their relative positions in the society and polity (150).

The idea of mixture leads to the formations of a spectrum of racial classifications within the greater label of *mestizaje*. It is this

idea of *mixture* that was embraced by much of the Spanish Caribbean and used to *create* their system of racial identity formation.[5] Racial categorization is then reflective of one's *shade* which can then be sub-categorized within a range of degrees for each skin tone (Simmons 2005).

While my dissertation aims to prove that this is an evolving reality, most academic scholarship argues that historically constructions of race within the DR are rooted in a certain racialized lens of nationality and history that continues to have a hegemonic hold on Dominicans worldwide. While such constructions are by no means static or lack the dynamism characteristic of the Hispanic Caribbean, Dominican colonial history facilitated the formation of a population that is not only fundamentally mixed-race but one that negotiated with racialized colonial discourses in a manner that privileged certain heritages over others. Furthermore, *dominicanidad* stands in opposition to U.S. binary racial logic through the ways in which class is able to radically shape how one is viewed racially (many times regardless of skin darkness or the presence of other features associated with African descent). Dominicans, both on the island and in the diaspora, are already familiar with a multi-focal process of identification and are a group who has been trained to read race on the body in a complex way.

[5] "This *mestizaje* is in danger of being submerged in movements to whiten and deny African and indigenous ancestry and appearance while exalting the multiethnic" (Beltrán 2008: 265)

What makes the Dominican context so unique is that while most Dominicans have African descent, that descent has been historically rejected and obscured in the DR through the formulation of the overarching and all-encompassing racial category of *indio*. The term "*indio*" *implies* that a certain person is descended from the indigenous and Spanish populations. Recognizing the significance of this myth as "the most important ethnic fabrication developed in the late nineteenth century" and one that continues to dictate much of Dominican conceptualizations of the racial self, Ernesto Sagás (2000) explains how "Mulattos, who make up most of the Dominican population, lexically disappeared and were replaced by the Dominican *indio*" (35). Fundamentally, it is suggested that the category allowed for the erasure of one of the Dominican ethnic contributors, whereby claiming solely indigenous and Spanish heritage. The *indio* identity was able to mask the presence of African descent while at the same time erroneously implying a harmonious racially-mixed society. In claiming a racial identity based in the indigenous community Dominicans create an emphasis on a "racial union [that attempts] to assert an already-existing *natural* basis for the nation to distinguish it from and position it against others" (Smith 1996: 151). This common or shared racial heritage provides a sense of nationalism and unification among the realistically ethnoracially diverse population. The formation of *indio* provided a distance from their colonial history and "created a mythological national past, with deep roots in the prehistory of the island, which gave the Dominican nation a sense of continuity and helped it repress its traumatic colonial

history" (Sagas 2000: 35). As this articulation of *indio* is a uniquely Dominican construct, it becomes a truly powerful tool in the process of nationalism.

This systematic distancing from acknowledging ingrained racial prejudice is even more complex when one investigates it further. Based on racist notions of *negra/o* inferiority, in the DR those notions are structured around their views of, and in relation to, Haiti. Much of Dominican identity is therefore formed in juxtaposition to how Dominicans racialize Haitians as the ones who are truly "Black" (Sagás 2000: 35). And in order to provide that necessary separation from Haitians "in the place of blackness, officially identity discourses and displays have held that Dominicans are racially Indian and culturally Hispanic" (Candelario 2007: 2). For Afro-Dominicans to consider themselves Black or of African descent meant that they shared a common heritage with Haitians, a population they see as racially and socially inferior to themselves. When they immigrate to the U.S., many Dominicans must confront this reality as they are often racialized and read as being of African descent.

U.S. Mediations and Paradigms of *Latinidad*

As part of an attempt to better theorize Latina/o subjectivity, identity, and representation, scholars must recognize that both Latina/os and those who study with/about them are required to contend with a U.S. national imaginary firmly entrenched in a binary White/Black conception of self. This framework both excludes Latina/os—and renders them invisible,

what Angharad N. Valdivia (2010), borrowing from Gaye Tuchmann,[6] refers to as "symbolic annihilation"—while at the same time *latinidad* challenges such a paradigm. Valdivia reminds us that Latina/os are undeniably both racially heterogeneous as well as a large portion of the mainstream mass media audience. While the latter reality is often painted in alarmist tones—based on notions of the unassimilable Latino and Spanish-language discrimination that have become so influential in U.S. popular representation of Latina/os—an increasingly significant Latino population is also represented in a homogenous and homogenizing fashion which, consequently, flattens the diversity between different Latino groups into a construction of a "brown" ethnicity/race (Dávila 2001; Mayer 2004; Molina-Gúzman 2010; Valdivia 2010). Such homogenization ignores that those lumped into this "brown" ethnicity/race have different and flexible identities, or *latinidades* (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997). As a social phenomenon, *latinidad* can be conceptualized as the "processes where Latino/a identities and cultural practices are contested and created in media, discourse, and public space" (Guidotti-Hernandez 2007: 212). Using this definition of *latinidad*, *dominicanidad* can be understood as more than a connection to "Dominican-ness," but also a discourse that simultaneously contradicts and reinforces articulations of *latinidad* more broadly. In order to assess how *dominicanidad* is positioned (or not) within discourses of U.S.-based *latinidad*, in this section I will review the literature that concentrates on: (1) hegemonic discourses based on African hypodescent, blackness, and the racialized Black/White binary, (2)

[6] See Gaye Tuchman (1978) *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*.

articulations of ethnic labels and constructions of *latinidad(es)*, and (3) notions of the panethnic Latino audience. Each of these three sets of literature are crucial to understanding how Latina/o subjectivity becomes framed within the U.S. and, more specifically, how *dominicanidad* is rendered nearly invisible within Latino panethnicity. Here I will both survey the significant work in each area as well as position it in conjunction with my own research.

Discourses of African Hypodescent and Blackness

Historically, U.S. racialization has been structured in a White/Black binary opposition that designates any person with traceable or observable African descent as Black.[7] This notion of hypodescent, has become colloquially known as the "one-drop rule." Specifically, "Because slavery was built upon the assumption that whites were a superior race and could not be enslaved, the one-drop rule also became increasingly important to justify the enslavement of a growing number of slaves with white skin and appearance" (Khanna 2010: 98). However, the notion of the one-drop rule did not lose any of its influence after emancipation and has continued to shape legal code as well as social understandings of blackness. Furthermore, as with any hegemonic ideology, we see processes of negotiation involving this construction of blackness where "to counter subjugation wrought by the one-drop rule, black Americans began to embrace this

[7] I use the words traceable and observable as there is a long legacy of racial passing where those of African descent have been perceived as white. These individuals who "passed" did so strategically as a devise to combat U.S. racism.

powerful rule as a way of resisting white racism. To do this, they began to invoke the rule as a tool of inclusivity to promote unity and numerical strength among the black community" (ibid: 99). As such, the one-drop rule is not only the framework for dominant notions of U.S. racialization but has been incorporated into self-racialization practices within the Black community. Therefore, as a construct, the one-drop rule permeates all U.S. racial discourses, including those that deal with those not originally from the country. In application this means, a person "of African descent has little choice but to identify as Black" (Davis 1997: 317).

Furthermore, blackness itself is constructed in a relational manner. While historically this relation has been an oppositional positioning of blackness versus whiteness, it nonetheless is a fluid category that can and does bend. On reflecting on the work of Stuart Hall, who argues that race is not a fixed and essentialized category but instead a floating signifier, I see not only the potential for Dominican inclusion in constructions of blackness but also the inclusion of Black bodies in constructions of *latinidad* that have categorically excluded them. Hall (1996) argues that "'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature" (166). As such, the room for, and more accurately, the demand for negotiation becomes evident when Dominicans in the U.S. are forced to make sense of their racialization in a system that categorizes them within discourses of blackness. Ginetta E. B. Candelario

(2007) contends that "Dominican identities are also embodied, displayed, enacted, and perceived according to their context," suggesting that at the heart of Dominican processes of ethnoracial identification lies a Dominican racialized consciousness that is constructed in juxtaposition to an understanding of blackness as existing elsewhere (in Haiti or the U.S., for example) (8). More importantly, there is a sense of fluidity that implies a flexibility of racialization due to the physical movement of Dominican bodies and the discourses that are carried alongside those bodies. Denise Brennan (2007) contends that "The past few decades of migration from the Dominican Republic to New York and the transnational cultural and economic flows between the two places have informed a diasporic mentality in the Dominican Republic" (210). As a consequence of this diasporic mentality, or the relational nature of Dominican racialization, ethnoracial identity negotiation becomes a critical juncture in Dominican positionality within the U.S.

When investigating the influence discourses of hypodescent and Black subjectivity have on those people of African descent who do not fit within the African American heritage narrative, it is important to note that blackness in the U.S. is based on assumptions of the essential Black subject who can trace a trajectory to enslavement. When dealing with Dominican racial negotiations, we should avoid the trappings of the one-drop rule which would place Dominicans as analogous to African Americans, as this could potentially erase the importance of their *latinidad*. Those that argue that Dominicans suffer from a

simple complex of refusing to acknowledge their "true" African descent de-historicize the Dominican subject. The potential result of this conflation could be the loss of the specific context and plight of Dominicans when they are lumped into American blackness.

Dominican systems of racialization are not recognized within dominant U.S. hegemonic racial ideology and cannot be expected to be reflected in processes of racialization within the U.S. Therefore, when Dominicans and other Afro-Latinos come into contact with a U.S. system of racialization, one that is fundamentally different from the ones that have previously framed their racial identity, two things occur: first they must re-negotiate their own self-ascribed racial identity, and, second they must realize that U.S. society places them within this system based on readings of the body and ethnic contextualization (Candelario 2007). U.S. racial hegemonic ideology is based on the normality of whiteness[8] and a strict White/Black binary opposition that does not allow for an unproblematic placement and articulation of those not easily placed in either category. When Dominicans first encounter U.S. racial ideology, they must reconcile their identities as Latino/a and/or mixed/*mestizaje* individuals with a system that would read them as Black.

This diversity problematizes the White/Black binary racialization process in the U.S. and forces an appropriation of raced bodies within this framework. More broadly, the Latino/a "body challenges the traditional binaries of racial representation,

[8] See Richard Dyer 1997.

specifically the poles of whiteness and blackness" (Ovalle 2008: 165). What is constructed is a visual system of non-whiteness that arbitrarily associates physical characteristics such as darkness of skin color, hair type, eye color, etc. with either a perceived whiteness or blackness (Beltrán 2002; Candelario 2007; Valdivia 2007). This in-between-ness reflects the difficulty to draw neat racial boundaries when reading racialized bodies of Latino/as and speaks to a history of mixture in Latin American cultures that becomes impossible to articulate in contemporary U.S. racial politics of the body (Valdivia 2007: 133-134 and Pena Ovalle 2008: 168). It is within this impossibility, that Dominicans in the U.S. must negotiate their identity. The result of this is that "it's no longer possible to talk about issues of race in exclusive black and white terms" (Davis 1997: 319).

Ethnic Labels, Pan-Ethnicity, and Group Identifications

This dissertation investigates the role of media consumption and interpretation in negotiations of *dominicanidad* in the diasporic community, the U.S. in particular. As an Afro-Latino population that culturally constructs their identity in terms of a romanticized and fantasized connection to a colonial and indigenous past, Dominicans position their subjectivity in opposition to those they see as embodying blackness—namely Haitians and other black Caribbeans, or African Americans in the U.S. While *latinidad* by its very nature challenges racialized binary thinking in the U.S., *dominicanidad* problematizes this

thinking even further by complicating what becomes acceptably included within the boundaries of *latinidad,* blackness, and/or whiteness. In the following chapters I disentangle these processes of identity problematization from the mediated discourses that inform them. Starting with the fundamental political issue of categorization, mass acceptance and application of a panethnic *latinidad* ignores alternative *latinidades*, especially those that include associations with blackness.

Vickie Mayer's (2003) scholarship on the media consumption, engagement, creation, and contextualization among Mexican-Americans in San Antonio suggests that for even those who are thought to be solidly placed at the heart of imagined panethnic *latinidad*, available media does not always resonate. Serving as an ethnographic investigation into Latino targeted and consumed media (both through Spanish and English language media sources), her scholarship reveals a reality of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Mexican-Americans. Mayer argues that among the young Mexican-Americans in San Antonio where she did her fieldwork, this results in a lack of power to represent themselves in much of their lives. Consequently, "Mexican American children and teenagers look to media they do not produce for 'communities of resemblance' with other Americans" as part of a process of self-identification and community participation (xv). Mayer reminds us with her fieldwork that reception is more than a reading based on the various elements of one's identity, it is also a dynamic *process* of interpretation and (dis)identification. Describing identity as a process implies that it is malleable and flexible, which is the very phenomenon

that my dissertation investigates. Anchoring my project in evolving Dominican identity and media consumption, I expand on the Mayer's scholarship by contending that identity is more than a singular process of media *interpretation*, it is most fundamentally a process of *negotiation*.

As a primary subdiscipline in the grounding of this dissertation, the literature on ethnic and racial categorization and their associated labels helps explain how *latinidad* is imagined. The confusion and contradicting discourses concerning the political name-game of what term best represents and identifies those people from Latin America or with Latin American descent and/or heritage is often dismissed as trivial but is actually deeply rooted in the shifting sociohistorical reality and lived tensions for those that I will refer to here as Latina/os. Popularly imagined—imagined being the key term here—as a homogenous "brown" race with a mixed indigenous and Spanish ethnic heritage, the extreme diversity within the Latino population is systematically flattened, ignored, and erased. While the term "Latino" is based in the politics of self-identification (and is therefore the reason I choose to use that term personally), the term "Hispanic" is one that is rooted in a grouping constructed by external forces and, therefore, generally, is not something U.S. Latino populations identify with (Calderon 1992). Puerto Rican scholar Juan Flores (2000), in addressing the political semantics of the evolution of this terminology, suggests that while often seen as interchangeable, or at the least, possessing trivial differences, the two terms are loaded with different mythic meaning and in reality are steeped in history and

the resulting power dynamics of U.S. constructions of those people it sees as originating in Latin America. Flores asserts that "With all the slippages and evident arbitrariness, though, what would seem a terminology free-for-all actually does mark off limits and contexts, and pressing issues of power" (2000: 191). Because Latina/os are a population that actively contest, by their very existence, systems of racial meaning within the U.S., they occupy an in-between status and are seen as both ambiguous and hybrid.

Through her historical and institutional examination of the U.S. census, Clara E. Rodriguez (2000) suggests that with the increasing convergence of the concepts of race and ethnicity within U.S. racial ideology, the role of Latina/os within this historically binary framework is one of confusion and tension. Ethnoracial categories, now revealed for what they are, sociohistorically context-dependent constructions, are in direct opposition to U.S. racial binary ideology as "For many Latinos, race is primarily cultural; multiple identities are a normal state of affairs; and 'racial mixture' is subject to many different, sometimes fluctuating, definitions" (Rodriguez 2000: 5). Consequently, on the U.S. census many Latina/os choose the "other race" category and write in a Latino identifier of some sort (nationality, *mestizo*, and other terms from their country of origin). Rodriguez suggests that those who had chosen "other race" as their identification were mostly viewed as either "mixed up or mixed" by mainstream U.S. Such an articulation suggests that "Hispanics" are confused about both their own racial identity *and* how to read a U.S. census. While insisting there are a plethora of reasons and explanations for such a selection,

she reluctantly offers the suggestion that selecting "other" is the result of not wanting to identify as Black. Her assertion of the avoidance of the label of blackness, combined with the way she frames competing racial constructions as discourses that are in conversation with each other, functions as a particular call for this dissertation scholarship. She contends that "the extent to which these different constructions of race influence one another because of immigration to the United States, transnational migration movements, and increased communications between both hemispheres is not yet clear" (Rodriguez 2000: 110-111). I address this directly with my own scholarship focusing on Dominicans in NYC and the ways in which they engage with media in the effort to (re)articulate what it means to be Dominican while living in the U.S.

Another opening for my dissertation research is found in the scholarship of Suzanne Oboler. In an effort to reveal how the concept of "Hispanic" was being interpreted and negotiated among Latina/o immigrants, Oboler (1995), whose scholarship now is somewhat dated, nevertheless, rightly emphasizes the process of constructing identities in everyday reality. For my dissertation, by investigating arbitrations of "blackness" instead of "Hispanic-ness," I further delve into her contention that for many immigrants it is when they immigrate that they "confront discrimination often for the first time and are further forced to recognize, through their own individual experience, the significance of racial and social prejudices, stereotypes, and labels that their own country's social organization historically allowed them to bypass" (Oboler 1995: 135). While

reflecting on the position of Latina/os in the imagined "American" community, Oboler laments the loss of language and cultural retention by the newer generations of Latin Americans who do not have the memories of their parents to continue to tie them to a nationally based identity and instead are left only with an identification of either Hispanic or Latino. However, I believe that this analysis is not universal among Latino populations, and while this is certainly true of some, for those who, for example, are in close proximity or positioned within circular migration patterns with the origin country of their parents, grandparents, etc., they can and often do retain a sense of national identity. Just as in the introductory vignette for this chapter, Dominican-Americans typically maintain a sense of nationality that does not fade after the immigrant generation (so much so that their children would chose to compete for their country of origin in the world's greatest athletic competition, the Olympics). This dissertation unveils how this fiercely sustained nationality intersects with and informs racialized conceptions of U.S.-based *latinidad* that is the result of what can be framed as an ethnoracial identity struggle.

Constructing a Panethnic Latino Audience

Much of what drives the homogenization of the diverse Latino population into a presumed consolidated panethnic group is the ways in which they are sold as an audience within media industries. As the scholarship of Arlene Dávila points out, the construction of a panethnic "Hispanic

market" both draws on and reinforces discourses that lump all those of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean origin under the banner of Hispanic/Latino. As just one example of her vast scholarship on *latinidad* and the "Hispanic market," in *Latinos Inc.*, Dávila (2001) contends that the formation of an imagined homogenous Hispanic audience was a result of the capitalist pursuit to market to a heterogeneous group of people who were seen as speaking the same language. Through the development of this marketing demographic, a new identity, one constructed through the negotiation of consumption, arose to become not only a source of identification but an ethno-racialized category. According to Dávila (2000), "maintaining the profitability of Latinos as a market has simultaneously involved the development of essentialist and authenticating discourses of U.S. *latinidad* that constrain its intrinsic cultural heterogeneity and compel its presentation as a bounded and hence easily targetable population" (38). Furthermore, Dávila offers an explanation as to how the heterogeneous population of peoples of Latin American and Caribbean origin became constructed as Hispanic through the symbolic expression of advertising. Here marketing is a constructive process that lumped multiple cultures and heritages into one panethnic label—rooted in notions of the Spanish language as a symbolic unifier—and subsequently made that label a consumer group with dispensable capital. In her comparative analysis between the Hispanic market and other minority markets within the U.S. (specifically, the African American and Asian markets). She posits that "ethnic marketing in general…responds to and reflects the fears and anxieties of

mainstream U.S. society about its 'others,' thus reiterating the demands for an idealized, good, all-American citizenship in their constructed commercial images and discourses" (218). Within this industrial framework, African Americans are seen as unsophisticated consumers who have no distinct culture of their own (mostly because their culture has been so intensely mined and appropriated by dominant U.S. culture) and where Asians and Asian Americans are supplied with a limited cultural capital based on discourses of the model minority.

The privileging of a certain paradigm of appearance based in the "Latin look"[9] (Rodriguez 1997) combined with an emphasis on "Walter Cronkite Spanish" (or Mexican Spanish) as the most "authentic" or "correct" way to represent Latina/os within the Spanish-language market works to set limitations on the acceptable boundaries of *latinidad*. Ultimately, Dávila suggests panethnic marketing feeds marginality, erases historical differences, and commodifies ethnicity so that it can be performed in the "correct" way, essentializing panethnic populations within over-simplified categories. Dominicans, and other non-Mexican-American Latina/os, are systematically excluded and pushed to the margins of these constructions of the Latino audience and the Hispanic market, which usually rely on generic associations of Mexican/Mexican-American identification. These other/Other specific Latino groups are nonetheless consuming multiple forms of media and engaging with them in active and negotiated

[9] As Rodriguez (1997) and others articulate, the "Latin look" assumes an individual with tan skin, dark hair, and dark eyes.

ways. Nevertheless, these populations are not always "hailed" by mass or Spanish-language media and even less frequently represented by them.

As an example of scholarship that examines questions of media reception and Latino audiences in ways that are both empirical and critical, Lucila Vargas's (2008) work on "transnational" Latina teens in the U.S. puts Judith Butler and Marwan Kraidy in dialogue with each other, constructing an approach to identity performativity that accommodates the intersectional nature of Latina/o identity, particularly through focus on notions of *mestizaje*. Combining Kraidy's (1999) articulation of hybridity (the process and product of consumption of the national and international) with Butler's (1988) theorizing of "doing" gender (as opposed to an always already existing essentialized gender subject), Vargas posits that "Latina teens' hybrid gendered identities are constituted *in and through* their media practices and *in and through* their talk about media and popular culture" (2008: 188). Published the same year, María Elena Cepeda's (2008) research on the negotiated nature of Latina popular music fandom and mainstream feminism similarly reinforces the role of the processes of identity building through media texts. She conducted a reception study with Latina college students regarding their responses to Latina icons in the entertainment media in order to ascertain how they were reconciling traditional Latino notions of femininity and aesthetics with more critical and ideological resistance to the limitations of those constructions. Establishing a foundation in the scholarship of Latina feminist scholars Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa,

Cepeda asserts that because visual images of Latinas in the media "teach" Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike what it means to be Latina/o, the Latinas she worked with believed that they were set up in an "us vs. them" dichotomy as they saw these icons as caught in a dialectic between agency and objectification.

This scholarship on the Latino audience is important in discussing Dominicans in the U.S. not only because they are consistently subsumed under its umbrella, but it furthermore reveals the influential role media representation and consumption plays in the individual negotiation of subjectivity within the U.S. Dominicans in the U.S. must contend with processes that position them within a panethnic Latino audience while simultaneously having their cultural and national specificity ignored as part of that constructed audience. As part of the larger negotiation of their subjectivity as Dominicans living in the U.S., Dominican-American identity becomes filtered through the systematic flattening and homogenizing of pan-Latino identification.

Dominican and Afro-Caribbean *Latinidad*

As the contested constructions of both political and market-based panethnic *latinidad* indicate, the actual historical trajectories, cultures, and subjectivities of different Latino groups are quite heterogeneous as well as hybrid in nature. Furthermore, discourses and representations of Caribbean *latinidad* are under-researched within Latina/o media studies and very rarely appear in a recognizable manner in U.S. mainstream, or even

Spanish-language, media. This section of the literature review brings together the varied scholarship that attempts to complicate panethnic *latinidad*, especially by scholars focusing on media studies. Included here is scholarship on Cuban, Puerto Rican, and the Dominican racial and ethnic identity, both in the Caribbean and in the U.S. Accounting for multiple, varied, and malleable Latino identities, or what can be referred to as *latinidades*, I examine the scholarship that foregrounds *mestizaje* and Latino cultural specificity among the citizens of the three islands. Of particular note, I provide an extensive review of the scholarship of Yeidy Rivero, who uses Puerto Rico as a point of reference to analyze negotiations of media among various Caribbean-based subjectivities. The culmination of this scholarship points to the ways in which *dominicanidad* is unique in relation to other Latino groups and the various extant conceptualizations of *latinidad*.

As a general trend, the majority of media representations and actors of Caribbean Latino origin are subsumed into a generic, panethnic Latino/Hispanic category. Chon Noriega and Ana López's *Ethnic Eye* (1996) labors to de-homogenize and re-center those Latino populations that often are lost and ignored when lumped into a panethnic mass identification of Latino/Hispanic. For them, in particular, Cubans in exile living in the U.S. represent a different Latino subjectivity, positionality, and *latinidad* than what is commonly represented as "Hispanic." López's analysis in this volume, on exiled Cuban media makers, asserts that this group has had a unique history and difficult time articulating their position and

being heard. She contends that Cuban exile efforts in the U.S. to establish a sense of national identity (one on the hyphen) are often "seen as the marks of a strident ethnocentrism already compromised by their challenges to the island's utopias rather than as anguished cries of exilic loss, liminality, and deterritorialization coupled with the paradoxical need to build, to reterritorialize, themselves anew" (40). Their scholarship is an intervention into the discourses that work to homogenize "the Latino experience" in monolithic terms, and while they do not directly speak to Dominican diasporic realities, they do provide a space for alternative Latino subjectivities to be highlighted in relation to more common discourses.

Part-and-parcel with these ethnoracial discourses of identity is their subsequent expression within a diasporic context. As part of her scholarship on Latina/o involvement in the "hip-hop zone," Raquel Z. Rivera (2003) looks at the seemingly competing constructions of *latinidad* and blackness and suggests that the Latino presence within a hip-hop subjectivity is contested, changing, and relational. She posits that "The blackness formerly restricted by the bounds of an ethno-racialized African Americanness began expanding to accommodate *certain* Latino groups as a population of ethno-racial Others whose experience of class and ethno-racial marginalization is in many ways virtually indistinguishable from the ghettocentric African American experience" (Rivera 2003: 99). Stemming from Caribbean Latino consciousness of their place within the African diaspora, this group within the United States became almost indiscernible from the African American

populations in New York, contributing to a shared "nigga" identification of the two groups (which should not be confused to the mass culture appropriation of the identifier). While a shared consciousness with African Americans provided an economic unity and a joint diasporic heritage, through the discourses of the *latina familia* and notions of essential *latinidad*, an increased disjuncture with African Americans has emerged. Rivera suggests that "For Puerto Ricans within hip hop, *latinidad* and Afro-diasporic blackness are at times parallel, at times intersecting identity discourses; sometimes they coexist while, at other times, they may compete" (2003: 106). She argues that, as identities shift, so too has there been a shifting negotiation of blackness and *latinidad* in hip hop in relation to notions of "entitlement" and "authenticity." Furthermore, she suggests that "Although highlighting Latino difference through tropicalizations, these discourses also have emphasized the existence of shared class-based ethno-racialized identities that are not circumscribed by the boundaries of either *latinidad* or African Americanness" (185). Yet she warns us that although the Afro-diasporic practices of Caribbean Latina/os rupture the stability of dominant identity conceptualizations that place African American-ness and Puerto Rican-ness as mutually exclusive and nonintersecting, the presence of these notions, nevertheless, produce real tensions within the hip hop zone. I would argue that Dominicans in NYC often share this very same zone that Rivera discusses, both geographically and culturally. They too must contend with the tension between blackness and *latinidad* and are presumably just as influenced by this shared sociohistorical position as Puerto Ricans.

For the current Dominican racial identity struggle, racialized binary logic is only one side of the coin. The way Afro-Caribbeans in the U.S. approach racial and ethnic negotiation does not rely solely on U.S.-based categorical constructions, nor should we expect any racialized/ethnicized identity to. The fundamental difference between racialized constructions in the U.S. and those in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean, and what I argue is the primary reason why Afro-Latino racialization does not translate well in the U.S., is firmly embedded within the notion of *mestizaje*. As a historically rooted concept that is intended to acknowledge the various racial and ethnic contributors to a truly heterogeneous group of people, the notion of *mestizaje* is a critical lens in which to contextualize constructions of "mixedness" among those of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean heritage (Sommers 1991; Beltrán 2008; Nakamura 2008). When introduced to a racial ideology based on hypodescent (historical "one-drop" rule) and severe racial binary, Latina/os of African descent have had a difficult time articulating for a U.S. public how they construct their identity as acknowledging racial mixture (Beltrán and Fojas 2008: 5). Latino diversity problematizes the institutionalized White/Black binary racialization process in the U.S. and forces an appropriation of ambiguously or vaguely raced bodies within this framework.

What this literature points to is a reality not of a singular *latinidad* but instead one that is informed by multiple *latinidades*. In the introduction to their edited volume on the process of "*tropicalization"*—articulated as a mythic conceptualization of *latinidad* used as a discursive strategy

that is based on Latina/o stereotypes and social tensions—Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997) deploy a complex theorization of representations of Latina/os and *latinidad*. They assert that *latinidad* is not an all-encompassing category including all things related to Latin America but a far more complex notion that is "contestatory and contested, fluid, and relational" (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997: 15). Rooted in their theorization of "hegemonic tropicalization" they deploy the logic of *latinidades* in order to "describe the sets of images and attributes superimposed onto both Latin American and U.S. Latino subjects from the dominant sector" (ibid). Ultimately, it is through the Orientalizing practice of tropicalization that all those who would be categorized as Hispanic/Latino by U.S.-based hegemonic racial thinking become homogenized under a singular umbrella *latinidad*; an identity category that fundamentally ignores and erases cultural specificity.

In her scholarship on the popular children's show *Dora the Explorer,* Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernandez (2007), building off Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman's articulation of *latinidades*, suggests that *Dora* is a particularly influential text that has the power to both shape and produce discourses of *latinidad*. She asserts that in the production of a consumer-ready Latina figure, the producers of *Dora* distort Latino identity, making it appear singular and monolithic by reinforcing a connection to Spain while ignoring or blurring indigenous and Black roots. In the case of *Dora*, Guidotti-Hernandez contends "When Dora is evoked as 'Latino,' Afro-Latino history and indigenous identity are subsumed under the sign 'mestizaje,'

which blurs the history of color, gender, and class hierarchies in Latino/a communities in the Americas. Such a conscious projection constructs Dora as a universal Latina subject" (216). There is certainly an inclusion of Afro-Latino culture (through various musical and visual markers), but there are no Black bodies tied to these representations, rendering them invisible in the show's construction of *latinidad*.

As the only study of Latino Caribbean-produced media of its kind, and therefore the reason I use it as an extended example of the notion of *latinidades,* the scholarship of Yeidy Rivero investigates a *mestizaje*-based racial dynamic in Puerto Rico and Cuba and the ways in which blackness has historically been and continues to be mediated within these dynamics. Investigating a region that is not only complex in terms of its global interconnectivity but also in terms of its inherently hybrid consciousness, in *Tuning Out Blackness* (2005) Rivero looks to the mediation of blackness and the discourses framing such mediations within the television industry in Puerto Rico at the individual, structural, institutional, historical, and socio-cultural levels. She structures her analysis of mediated blackness through the framework of "translation" as an analytical tool and signification process that engages with influential external racialized discourses by (re)appropriating them within Puerto Rican-centric hegemonic racial ideology. She cites four primary "discursive translations" in Puerto Rican mediations of blackness: *mestizaje* and racial democracy, debates over U.S. colonial control and cultural influence, conciliation of the "local" and "foreign," and post-Cuban revolution migration to Puerto Rico.

Of these mediated translations of blackness, the framework of *mestizaje* is particularly influential. Although all of the Spanish Caribbean, and much of Latin America for that matter, construct their identities as *mestiza* in nature, in Puerto Rico this construction is informed by the nationalistic discourse of *la gran familia puertorriquena*. *La gran familia puertorriquena* is the manifestation within Puerto Rico of *mestizaje* that includes Taino Indian, Spanish, and African heritages. While this concept emerged in the historical context of Puerto Rico's attempt at cultural and political rejection of Spanish colonial rule, it has been re-articulated to address the island's contemporary commonwealth status as part of its new colonizer: the U.S. Specifically, this construction asserts that unlike in the U.S. where there is racism and racial stratification, in Puerto Rico they have a racial democracy. Rivero recognizes that this notion is not only a problematic assertion, but one that is not reflective of the apparent discrimination faced by Black Puerto Ricans and Othered immigrants whose representation in embedded in projected blackness.

Dominican television, on the other hand, has had a slightly different relationship with blackness than that which Rivero described in Puerto Rico. The television industry within the DR, while it follows the U.S. model (just as in the case of Puerto Rico), has historically had only limited direct involvement from the U.S. and mostly only creative influence from Cuba (Murray and Murray 1996; Menendez Alarcon 1992; Rivero 2001 and 2009). While this is quickly changing, due to the U.S. and the DR's highly interconnected nature combined with

the increasing availability of programming from the U.S. and Latin America, Dominican television remains an excellent source for cultural analysis because it has been developed internally and therefore is highly culturally reflexive. Unsurprisingly, Dominican society as a whole closely identifies with what is being shown to them through their media and relate to it as a reflection of their way of life and worldview (Alarcon 1992: 96; Goin 2009). Moreover, much of the print, television, and broadcast media that are produced on the island are available to those in the diaspora and vice versa. Therefore, as Benedict Anderson (1983) would argue, shared and simultaneous consumption of media throughout the diaspora has the potential to sustain a strong sense of diasporic imagined community. And within this imagined space, identity discourses are both challenged and reaffirmed.

Diaspora Studies and the Mediation of Diaspora

As a discipline that was formulated as the response to both African American studies and British cultural studies, diaspora studies aims to problematize the overly simplistic and unsatisfactory scholarship on migratory flows of people in both a historical and a contemporary sense. In relation to media, it emphasizes not just the potentially active audience as we see in cultural studies but one that is embedded in processes of resistance, agency, and self-identification. The scholarship of Stuart Hall is a particularly useful place to start as he emphasizes that Caribbean identity, as with all forms of identity, is in a constant

process of becoming, one that seeks to explain the trauma of colonial experience in relation to the shifting constructions of an essentialized blackness and/or diasporic consciousness.[10] While frequently associated with the scholarship of Paul Gilroy, whom I discuss shortly, diaspora studies is increasingly being used in media studies research.[11] Diaspora is not just about human and cultural flows, it is also about media flows. Diasporic media flows that connect those within the Dominican diaspora are important for more than just maintaining familial and cultural bonds, they are fundamentally a bridge that ties the DR to its diaspora in an intimate, instantaneous, and highly engaged fashion. Beginning with Gilroy's scholarship, I explain his framework but ultimately conclude that it is Flores's articulation of "the diaspora striking back" that is especially applicable to the processes and realities of the Dominican diaspora.

As a seminal, yet highly critiqued,[12] scholar in the increasingly critical field of diaspora studies, Gilroy (1993) works to problematize articulations of the African

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[10] As a bridge between the theorization of British cultural studies and the field meant to be a direct response to its Anglo-centrism, diaspora studies, Stuart Hall (1993) attempts to push the boundaries of cultural studies by addressing the dual reality of Caribbean-based identity. Reminding us that identity is not an essential and static thing, but one that is never complete and always in production, Hall looks at what he conceives of as the two ways of thinking about cultural identity, specifically that within the Afro-Caribbean: (1) a shared collective identity based on notions of a "true self' and on a sense of shared history and ancestry and (2) one acknowledging the deep rooted differences in identity among those in the diaspora due to the intervention of history and the ruptures and discontinuities that informed who people were to become. He insists that notions of collective blackness and a shared cultural memory of enslavement and colonialism should in no way be trivialized or neglected and that "Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront…dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation of the West" (Hall 1993: 225).

[11] See Nigel Thrift 1997; Michael Curtin 2007; Yeidy Rivero 2009; and Louisa Schein 2002.

[12] See Louis Chude-Sokei's 1996; Christine Chivallon 2002; Steven Vertovec 1997; and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza 2005.

Diaspora and proffers his now frequently cited and prolific conceptual framework of the Black Atlantic. A follow-up to Hall's scholarship, Gilroy suggests that the African Diaspora should not be conceived of as a one-way stream of bodies and cultures across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas; instead his contention is that—through the application of the metaphor of ships and the middle passage—the result of African enslavement looks more like a network of crisscrossing trajectories that include both the tropes of exodus as well as those of return (whether that is bodies or cultural artifacts). Embedding a significant portion of his scholarship in the work of African American intellectuals, and basing his theorizing on that which is most intimate to him, Black Britain, he articulates his conceptualization of the Black Atlantic. As a direct response to what he argues are the ethnocentric and nationalistic frameworks of British cultural studies—again, as first suggested by Hall—Gilroy tenders the Black Atlantic as an alternative lens for viewing modernity. Gilroy proposes that cultural scholars should "take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (15). His framework attempts to engage the spatial aspects of diaspora with its temporal, historical, memory, and narrative aspects. He formulates an articulation of the Black Atlantic as a web of diasporic identities, a series of crossroads, that are not ever fixed but are constantly becoming.

My own research on the Dominican diaspora is positioned in dialogue with this scholarship and the interventions it

proffers. It is in the work of Juan Flores that I find a theoretical and critical bridge from Hall and Gilroy to the realities of the Dominican diaspora. As one of the extremely few instances of Hispanic-Caribbean diasporic scholarship, Flores (2009) provides a work that is as exceptional as the research topic is rare. By taking a more grounded approach, Flores attempts to explain the *process*—as opposed to a place-oriented identity—of diaspora in a manner that not only investigates social and historical reality but reflects the textures of diaspora as a human experience. Flores looks at a part of the diasporic process that is often overlooked and under-theorized: the return (or what he refers to as the "diaspora striking back"). As one of the few scholars looking at the intertwined and co-constructing discourses of the diaspora with the "home" country, his work provides a critical entrée for my research on Dominican identity and the interaction of racial discourses from the island among those currently inhabiting diasporic spaces. Modern diasporas—stemming from asymmetries of transnational power—are dialectical, overlapping, messy, and porous (Appadurai and Hall[13]). Therefore, returns ("Re-asporicans"), and their subsequent ideological challenges, highlight the circular nature of Caribbean diasporic reality ("counterstreams"). Flores posits that diasporic Caribbeans not only send/bring back money but also carry with them ideas, values,

[13] Of particular note, Stuart Hall's (1997) essay "New Ethnicities" seeks to explore the way in which the concepts of the global and the local configure subject positions. Hall posits that identity is an active process, in which people know their identity in relation to others perceived as excluded from their group and not like them. Hall suggests it is in the imagining of a homeland that no longer exists—as it is instead a painting in the cultural memory—those that he calls "new ethnics" experience the necessary "moment of enunciation." They themselves are the keepers of this mythical origin.

identities, and cultural elements in the form of "cultural remittances." Flores asserts that returnees unsettle entrenched ideological apparatuses and often function as "carriers of social change." And in those dynamics where the pattern is bi-directional, circulatory, and frequent (such as in the case of the DR and Puerto Rico), such bi-national consciousnesses have very real impacts on self-conceptualization and identification.

Dominican diasporic identity is frequently excluded from the immigration flow models suggested by diaspora studies. Of particular issue, I see much of this scholarship as reinforcing a local/global binary opposition instead of deconstructing it as this literature claims to do. As a result, I assert, this approach is inadequate in addressing the type of intense interconnectivity and mediated cultural transfers that are characteristic of the Dominican diaspora. Dominicans in the diaspora and on the island have a uniquely circular migration pattern, by which they come seeking work in the U.S. (or other countries they see as providing better economic opportunity) and return to the DR after saving up a reserve of money. They then return to work again at the point in which they need to build capital once more. My contention is that this pattern is stabilized by connections linking each position of the migratory map, one that is constituted through active communication networks with family and friends and that depends heavily on media usage. It is these very networks that I investigate, looking at notions of shared media consumption, communication and identity flows, and processes of identity (re)negotiation influenced a U.S.-based reality of identity in flux.

METHODOLOGY: APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In many ways, "the field" for my project on Dominican-American identity construction is a moving target as it is in a state of constant flux and perpetual circularity. However, by utilizing several methods within this project I am able to better saturate what can be uncovered from a diasporic fieldsite. In order to provide a more complete picture, I utilized a triangulated research approach that combines qualitative interviews with Dominicans and Dominican Americans with, internet, archival, and textual sources. During the primary period of fieldwork conducted during the Summer of 2013 in NYC, I performed both interviews and archival research. Centering my efforts in the Dominican communities within the city (for instance in Washington Heights, which has the most concentrated population of Dominicans in the U.S.), I conducted site-oriented fieldwork. In conjunction with these more traditional forms of research, I additionally conducted an audience study via the internet that included reception methods such as textual and discursive analysis. These methods, in concurrence with each other, are the most effective means to address the project's research goals.

New York City Fieldwork

This component of my study strived to conduct fieldwork following in the vein of the scholarship of Purnima Mankekar (1999), who asserts that while hegemonic media discourses are not closed messages, these discourses nonetheless set limits on negotiated readings.[14] What I draw

from her work is the notion of interpellation—the ability of certain media to "hail" certain audiences, who are always spectators that negotiate with these texts in active ways. For Dominican-American audiences, they are also socialized through certain hegemonic constructions of ethnoracial identity, having two systems of socialization that they must reconcile. How are they navigating these two systems of identity, and, as in Mankekar's scholarship, is media consumption an extremely influential agent of socialization?

Among the methods I included in my fieldwork were the techniques of in-depth interviews, informal surveys, and participant observation. These methods are particularly well suited for obtaining "thick" [15] and open-ended responses. Furthermore, it was more effective to build on each method after conducting an initial round of in-depth interviews as these first interviews were integral to the direction of the project. Moreover, it is from the in-depth interviews that the researcher is able to collect the details of everyday life. Focusing most of my networking around community events, places of gathering (like salons, restaurants, and community centers), and contacts I cultivated from the City University of New York Dominican Studies Institute (such as Nelson Santana, the archivist and librarian of the CUNY DSI library), I used a loose

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[14] As part of this examination, Mankekar looks at notions of selfhood and subjectivity in terms of the concept of interpellation, a concept that acknowledges the intricacies of the relationship between ideology and subjectivity. .

[15] Clifford Geertz as a critical proponent of the turn to reflexivity in Anthropology proffered the approach of "thick description" as a means to do anthropology in a way that is more reflective and requires less direct interpretive framing by the anthropologist (1973).

snowball sampling method to meet research participants. Overall, I conducted 21 in-depth interviews and, through living in the Dominican-dominant community of Washington Heights, was more or less able to immerse myself within participant observation on a daily basis. In addition to these forms of data collection, I conducted industrial interviews with two Dominican-centric website producers (ThatsDominican.com's Manuel "Minus P" Pimentel and ESENDOM.com's Nelson Santana).

Furthermore, during my stint in the field, I conducted archival research at the CUNY DSI Library located at The City College of New York. While the objective of this research was to serve as auxiliary information framing my overall dissertation project, and for that its collections are incomparable, I also utilized these archival materials as part of a critical and textual analysis of Dominican media representation and negotiation. This institution houses extensive collections concentrating on Dominican and Dominican Americans. The archive holds written, visual, and audio collections concerning Dominican culture and people. Most of the materials in this archive come from members of the Dominican community who have a direct connection to NYC. It includes collections from Tito Enrique Cánepa (painter), Rafael Petitón Guzmán (musician and composer), Normandía Maldonado (founder of the Centro Cultural Ballet Quisqueya), Juan Paulino (musician), and Zunilda Fondeur (TV producer and personality), just to name a few. Zulinda Fondeur's archive collection in particular consists of over 5,000 videos (from the

popular New York Latino public affairs series *Realidades*) showcasing interviews with many members of the Dominican community along with various print materials (photographs, magazines, newspaper clippings, flyers, etc.). The library and its archives were an exciting resource for this dissertation.

Internet Critical Cultural and Reception Study

Due to my limited time in the field, and in the interest of diversifying my research methods, I additionally conducted internet-based research in the form of a critical cultural study that primarily consisted of a reception study and textual/discourse analysis. For this portion of my research project I was guided by the following questions: How are Dominicans/Dominican-Americans broadly utilizing the internet as a medium of ideological exchange? More specifically, which media texts emerge as catalysts for such exchanges among geographical and digital Dominican communities? And what ethnoracial, cultural, and political economic discourses are being utilized within these spaces? Beginning with a rough preliminary study during March 2013, a few months before entering the field, I continued with a more pointed survey throughout the dissertation writing process. As a rich resource for witnessing discourses in the process of negotiation, internet-based study is not only an efficient but a textually "thick" way to approach research that seeks to discover how real people as parts of real audiences interpret and apply media messages in their everyday lives. What I add to more traditional

approaches to internet research with my dissertation is a re-articulated framework for studying "place" and "location." Drawing on the theoretical groundwork of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) and their rearticulation of "the field,"[16] I extend this further. I contend that for Dominican-Americans and Dominican nationals living in the U.S., media interaction and consumption are a means to cement their identity in a distinctly Dominican nationality. Media is not merely a communication device, it is a space, a locality that articulates daily *dominicanidad*.

My internet reception study methodologically aimed at revealing how people consume certain media and the function of that media for them in a multitude of ways.[17] Based on websites mentioned during my interviews, those I was familiar with based on my own searches for *dominicanidad* online, and a snowball investigation of the recommended links of initial websites I visited, I eventually decided to focus on three websites that I saw as actively negotiating the meaning of *dominicanidad* within the U.S. context. Ruling out those websites meant for exclusively DR audiences, I chose the following three websites to analyze based on a high level of audience engagement and community building potential: ThatsDominican.com, ESENDOM.com, and DR1.com.

[16] In their unprecedented indictment of the anthropological tendency to be selectively self-reflexive or critical, Gupta and Ferguson jump to the very heart of anthropological inquiry by deconstructing the notion of "the field." They call for the de-centralization and de-fetishization of the conceptualization of the field.

[17] Janice Radway, whose work is central to the reception studies canon, emphasizes the importance of ethnography. And while she does not diminish the importance of textual analysis, she does argue that researchers should pay just as much attention, if not more, to the activity of reading in and of itself —in whatever form that reading may occur, for example reading the televisual text. Radway's contention is that the act of reading is more complex, and her work here is proof that by looking at mass-produced cultural products we can see that, yes, ideology is hegemonic, but it is not all-pervasive.

The research on these websites was conducted through prolonged observance and interaction in their online forums, interviews with two of the websites' creators, and the discussion of these particular websites within my fieldwork interviews. I not only analyzed the websites textually but also utilized them as a participant observer. More specifically, I was able to ascertain a wider survey of Dominicans in several different locations and also have access to culturally-oriented digital communities.

Turning to the scholarship by those who study racialized and/or ethnicized reception, I find the foundation for this component of my project. Jacqueline Bobo's and Viviana Rojas's scholarship, respectively, focuses on the ways media resonate racially and ethnically with female media consumers of color. Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) asserts that Black women, while often ignored by mainstream media, are an interpretive community that display "a shrewdness about their status in society and about the way black women are viewed by others" (82). Positing that black women interact with media as a form of cultural work, she uses study of the reception to the film and book *The Color Purple* to demonstrate that (media) texts are discursive forums for black women to engage with issues that are important to them. Similarly, Rojas (2007), in her work on Spanish-language talk shows in the U.S., asserts that Latina viewers in the U.S. are an active audience, positing, "Latinas don't just watch television, they watch it in a personal and social context that shapes their consumption and interpretations of television texts. Their ethnic, gender, and class identity permeates their evaluations" (302). Both of these

scholars situate audiences of color in active negotiation and contestation with images that are meant to represent them and suggest that such audiences often challenge and reappropriate those very representations in a way that is culturally meaningful to them. This is precisely what I uncover among Dominican-American audiences, how they position themselves as active interpretive communities that have a complex relationship with U.S. ethnoracial representation.

Through supplementing qualitative interviews and reception study findings with critical and textual analysis of the actual media texts being consumed, a more in-depth understanding of the practices of spectatorship and identification can be elucidated. Enabled by the theorization of the shifting location of "the field" by Gupta and Ferguson, and the conflation of "real" and internet-based notions of place, the potential to theorize a more complex process of identity negotiation not limited to one particular fieldsite is opened up to me. Acknowledging that the notion of "the field" as a bounded place is an academic illusion opens up space for a complexity that accommodates for the diasporic networks of circular immigration and identity formation that are often left out of scholarship on *latinidad* and blackness within the U.S.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

After this initial chapter, in Chapter One, "Mediated 'Americanization' of Dominican Mainstream Figures," I examine Dominican responses to those few figures of Dominican heritage who appear in

mainstream U.S. media. Rooted primarily in interviews conducted during my NYC fieldwork as well as discourse and textual analyses, this chapter approaches these figures as star texts that have meaning in both greater U.S. popular culture and within Dominican communities in the U.S. In this chapter I address the questions: how are Dominicans living in the U.S. responding to mainstream figures with Dominican heritage and how is that Dominican-ness being interpreted in terms of authenticity and relatability? What are the burdens of representation that these figures carry, and what factors have been used to justify their inability to satisfy that burden among Dominican U.S. audiences? Furthermore, how do those interpretations reveal the directions of current struggles over the meanings of blackness, *latinidad*, *afrolatinidad*, and *dominicanidad*? Taking an in-depth look at two Dominican celebrities, actress Zoe Saldana and baseball player Alex "A-Rod" Rodriguez, I argue that Dominicans in the U.S. believe that each has gone through a process of distancing from their Dominican roots and a subsequent "Americanization." I conclude this chapter by asking the question: is there a scenario in which a figure of Dominican heritage could attain both mainstream success in the U.S. as well as the support of the U.S. Dominican community? Through an analysis of Dominican music stars Prince Royce and Aventura, I contend that mainstream stars of Dominican heritage can find U.S. Dominican support and identification if they are seen as possessing an "authentic" *dominicanidad*.

Chapter Two, "MTV's *Washington Heights* and Televisual *dominicanidad*," analyzes fieldwork interviews and

internet reception study of Dominican responses to the MTV series *Washington Heights* (2013), a reality show shot in a neighborhood of NYC that has the largest and most concentrated Dominican presence in the U.S. This chapter is concerned with examining the following questions: what types of discourses appear in the reception of MTV's *Washington Heights* among Dominicans living in NYC and how did they interpret the show's attempt at televisual *dominicanidad*? Furthermore, what industrial constraints framed the show as produced and how might we understand the program in relation to the broader MTV reality television canon? I explore the reception to MTV's *Washington Heights* as not only the first mainstream Dominican-centric media text but also as an inroad to active negotiations concerning the nature of *dominicanidad*. Both beholden to the constructed MTV brand and the functions of reality television more broadly, *Washington Heights* is positioned within a complicated vector of identification. Obviously facing an upward battle against the burden of representation, the show was unable to satisfy Dominican expectations. Many lamented the way *dominicanidad* was portrayed on the show, insisting that the show was not an authentic representation of their lives and identity. Granted, *Washington Heights* had channel specific industrial constraints due to practices of constructing programming for the MTV audience. Yet there is something to be said of the show's inability to resonate with the Dominican community it claimed to be featuring.

Chapter Three, "Online Critical Cultural Study and the 'Alternative Ideological Space' of Active Identity Negotiation,"

constructs an online reception and cultural study. As a critical new component to much of reception-based research, as well as contemporary media consumption, online technologies provide researchers with a higher level of access, as well as engagement, with media spectators. Internet forums are especially suited for discursive expression and interaction, specifically in the case of those who have transitional, multi-axel, and multi-locational subjectivities. Therefore, this chapter is informed by the following research questions: How are Dominicans/Dominican-Americans broadly utilizing the internet as a medium of ideological exchange? More specifically, which media texts emerge as catalysts for such exchanges among geographical and digital Dominican communities? What ethnoracial, cultural, and political economic discourses are being expressed within these spaces? And, which websites fit the distinction of an "alternative ideological space" through a prioritizing of *dominicanidad?* In order to investigate the role of digital communities in the negotiation of *dominicanidad,* I discuss three websites that focus on the Dominican experience in the U.S. Selected from the extensive range of online spaces frequented by Dominicans diasporically, I investigate the following websites: ThatsDominican.com, ESENDOM.com, and DR1.com. These online spaces, those I contend are potential "alternative ideological spaces," provide forums for community building, identity negotiation, and articulation of voices that are ignored in more mainstream venues. I use textual and rhetorical analyses to examine these websites and root my interpretations in my fieldwork findings. While each of these three websites have different

goals and different approaches concerning the representation of *dominicanidad*, they all are spaces in which Dominican/Dominican-American identity is contested, re-affirmed, and re-articulated.

The conclusion, "'*Mi raza es dominicana*': Afro-Caribbean Racial Negotiation as a Unique Lens for Approaching U.S. Racial Hegemony," builds on my findings to discuss how Dominicans in the U.S. position their notions of self firmly within a sensibility of Dominican national identity. Staking a claim for the right to uniquely identify themselves outside of U.S-based frameworks of identification, Dominicans in the U.S. refuse to place themselves within a White/Black dichotomy and instead continue to hold on tight to those paradigms that resonate with them. Facilitated by ever advancing communication technology, frequent return visits, and the concentration of culture obliged by an enclave community reality, Dominicans in the U.S. have avoided the traditional assimilation path that most U.S. immigrant groups have followed. As exemplified by the previous chapters, media consumption plays a significant role in how U.S.-based *dominicanidad* is conceptualized as authentic, shared, and appropriately represented in U.S. media. Whether it is through the criticism of celebrities of Dominican heritage, failed attempts at televisual *dominicanidad*, or the impact of digital communities on how *dominicanidad* is negotiated, an examination of U.S. media reveals that *dominicanidad* within the U.S. in a state of flux and constant becoming. Just as the Dominicans I interviewed refused to de-center *dominicanidad* within their individual subjectivities, this conclusion is a

testament to the complex and problematic ways in which media attempt to engage with discourses of identity. Consequently, I conclude this study with a discussion of those themes of the Dominican experience in the U.S. most salient among the NYC Dominicans that are living them: the Dominican imaginary, a complex and shifting relationship with blackness, and the hyphenated reality of being both "here" and "there."

Ultimately, this research will give voice to an identity struggle that is seldom acknowledged while at the same time providing a significant addition to the literature as a reflection on the processes of ethnoracial identity within the U.S. What it means to be Dominican while living in the U.S. is a dynamic, active, and negotiated process that I unveil through the ways Dominicans interpret and consume visual media texts and formats.

Chapter One: Mediated *dominicanidad*: Dominican/Dominican-American Responses to Dominicans in U.S. Mainstream Media

Every time I asked it, I knew it was somewhat of a trick question: "do you know of any celebrities in mainstream media who are Dominican?" The most common initial response to this question was something along the lines of "there are not many, if any." Dominican/Dominican-American respondents in my fieldwork study suggested that Dominican representation in U.S mainstream media is limited, yet, at some point, almost every person I interviewed mentioned actress Zoe Saldana and baseball player Alex "A-Rod" Rodriguez. However, many of them informed me that Saldana and Rodriguez, along with other Dominican celebrities in the U.S. public eye, have distanced themselves from their Dominican roots, claiming these celebrities had "forgotten that they were Dominican" and have "Americanized" in order to achieve more popularity and have more successful careers. The Dominican community in the U.S. is often fiercely connected to their cultural heritage and see these (off)white-washed celebrities as those who have squandered the opportunity to represent their community in a way that would resonate with them. While many see these celebrities as victims of the U.S. media system, others see them as turning their backs on where they came from.

The limited representation and mediated invisibility of Dominicans in mainstream U.S. media does not go

unnoticed by the U.S. Dominican community. As a result, they latch onto any figure that has a link to *dominicanidad* and place a heavy "burden of representation" on those figures. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer (1988) expand on Stuart Hall's theorization of James Baldwin's "burden of representation," contending that "if only *one* voice is given the 'right to speak,' that voice will be heard, by the majority culture, as 'speaking for' the *many* who are excluded or marginalised from access to the means of representation" (4). The result of this places an undue responsibility on those few individuals of a marginalized group who are granted tenure in U.S. mass media and popular culture. Unlike white celebrities who are seen as individuals in and of themselves, Dominicans, largely because of their limited representation, have to "represent the race" and are expected to be a reflection of the Dominican community as a whole. Furthermore, by making these Dominican celebrities a stand-in for an entire group of people, these individuals have their subjectivity stripped and are subsequently transformed into an object that can be read as a cultural text and utilized within discourses of what constitutes *dominicanidad*.

While *dominicanidad* could roughly translate to "Dominican-ness," it is better understood within a framework of *latinidades*. As a more nuanced articulation of the concept of *latinidad*—which is a flexible and ambiguous association with Latino identity, culture, and community on a pan-ethnic level—*latinidades* acknowledges the diversity and hybridity among those commonly identified as Latino/Hispanic. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (1997)

assert that *latinidad* is not an all-encompassing category including all things related to Latin America, but a far more complex notion that is "contestatory and contested, fluid, and relational" (15). They deploy the logic of *latinidades* in order to "describe the sets of images and attributes superimposed onto both Latin American and U.S. Latino subjects from the dominant sector" (ibid). It is through U.S. homogenizing pan-ethnic discourses that all those who would be categorized as Hispanic/Latino become consolidated into one identity category: an identity category that fundamentally ignores and erases cultural specificity. Ultimately, Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman contend that there is not one singular umbrella *latinidad*, but rather multiple *latinidades*. *Dominicanidad* can be understood as a further nuance to *latinidades*, framing the way Dominican-ness is understood and experienced in relation to both normative and culturally specific forms of *latinidad*. Furthermore, as the majority of Dominicans have some degree of African-descent, they must also contend with constructions of *afrolatinidad* as well as U.S. articulations of blackness.

Gesturing towards an understanding of U.S.-based *dominicanidad*, this chapter addresses the question: how are Dominicans living in the U.S. responding to mainstream figures with Dominican heritage and how is that Dominican-ness being interpreted in terms of authenticity and relatability? What are the burdens of representation that these figures carry, and what factors have been used to justify their inability to satisfy that burden among Dominican U.S. audiences? Furthermore, how do those

interpretations reveal the directions of current struggles over the meanings of blackness, *latinidad*, *afrolatinidad*, and *dominicanidad*?

This chapter examines Dominican celebrity through the eyes of the Dominican community in the U.S. based on the findings from both my New York City (NYC) fieldwork and online reception research. I use responses from 20 in-depth interviews conducted while living in Washington Heights (a neighborhood of Manhattan that has the highest concentration of Dominican residents) which involved Dominican-identified participants and addressed questions about their experience with Dominican representation, mediated identity negotiation and consumption, and views of mainstream U.S. media. In conjunction with these interviews, I examined discussion forums on mainstream, Latino, and Dominican websites that featured pieces on Saldana and Rodriguez as part of an online reception study. Investigating the ways audiences interpret each celebrity as star texts, both forms of research focused on star-audience relationships—what has been referred to as para-social relationships by Elizabeth Perse and Rebecca Rubin (1989), David Giles (2000), Chris Rojek (2001), among many others—and the role of such relationships in the articulation of a Dominican-American identity. Building on star/celebrity studies scholarship (Dyer 1998; Negra 2001; Rojeck 2001; Holmes 2005) alongside Latina/o media studies scholarship rooted in critical race theory (Valdivia 2000; Beltrán 2009; Molina-Guzmán 2010, 2013), I contend that Saldana and Rodriguez have sacrificed potential Dominican-American identification and fandom for mainstream success. What I conclude is

that while Saldana and Rodriguez have not been able to manage their burden of representation in a way that facilitates Dominican/Dominican-American identification, few stars of Dominican heritage have. Dominican-American music star Prince Royce and the bachata group Aventura serve as star texts that those I interviewed and those online can more easily form a sense of shared *dominicanidad*.

CELEBRITIES AS TEXT

For those in the public eye, those who would be considered to have celebrity or star status, their lives (however constructed those lives might be) become part of popular culture and its texts. Not only can the films, television shows, magazines, etc. that celebrities appear in be analyzed as cultural texts, but their personae—those parts of themselves that are performed and available for public consumption and interpretation—can be analyzed and read as cultural texts as well. Moreover, celebrities are popularly seen as representatives of our society, however inaccurate or problematic that might be. Chris Rojek (2001) suggests that "celebrities simultaneously embody social types and provide role models" (16). Based on assumptions of merit and achievement, celebrities are often positioned as not merely representative of us all, but a reflection of what we would ideally be—the most attractive, talented, passionate, hard-working of all of us in our society. Stars that identify with or are identified as part of a marginalized group are expected to not only reflect social ideals more broadly but be a "good" representative of their

marginalized group. Furthermore, media institutions function as apparatuses of marginalization, resulting in a cultural institution that works to reinforce dominant ideologies simultaneously with its production of stars.

The relationship between celebrities of Dominican heritage and the U.S. Dominican audience becomes a synecdoche for the mediated invisibility of *dominicanidad*. Richard Dyer (1998) posits that "from the perspective of ideology, analyses of stars—as images existing in films and other media texts—stress their structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced" (3). Hollywood stars exist in a way in which they are intended to embody and personify certain social types. Stars are not only seen as individuals in the same way that people without fame are seen as individuals, instead "stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people" (Dyer 1998: 20). Therefore, the way the public reads a star has multiple levels, among these their public persona, their private self, and the characters or roles they portray in media. For Dyer, audiences interpret stars based on more than one axis of signification, where the various texts audiences are exposed to all contribute to an interpretation of that star. He argues that for audiences, "the roles and/or the performance of a star in a film were taken as revealing the personality of the star" (Dyer 1998: 20). Yet, only certain elements of themselves are promoted or highlighted to audiences, creating limitations and frameworks for how they should be

read. Whether a star is seen as the personification of beauty, grace, rebelliousness, masculinity, whiteness, etc., Dyer contends that "one needs to think of the relationships…between stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture (which are reproduced in the actual practice of making films, and film stars)" (31). What a star signifies to an audience is rooted in the workings of ideology, and Dyer suggests that the star-audience relationship operates as an intensification of conflict/exclusions in mass culture.

Although Dyer focuses exclusively on Hollywood stars, he believes his analysis can be expanded to other types of stars, and, I argue here, it can be expanded to celebrities more generally as well. Su Holmes (2005) revisits Dyer, attempting to appropriate his work for a more contemporary media context. She defines "'celebrity'…in terms of the *system of representation*—its conventions, structures and circulation—within which the celebrity self resonates within the public sphere" (Holmes 2005: 10). She takes Dyer's articulations of personhood as they pertain to stars and not only insists they are still relevant outside of his initial context of Classical Hollywood Cinema but furthermore can be used to understand celebrity as a wider phenomenon. Moreover, Holmes suggests that celebrity and celebrity texts are useful in analyses of identity, arguing that "it is *because* of the apparatus of manipulation and 'hype' that stars could operate as a site for the working through of discourses on the construction of identity" (Holmes 2005: 14). Put another way, identity is negotiated through the star/celebrity-audience relationship.

While it is often assumed that identity is negotiated along axis of identification or lack of identification, audience interaction with celebrities as texts is usually more complex than this. The audience-star relationship between the Dominican community and stars of Dominican heritage is not merely a case of identification vs. lack of identification, it is a negotiated process based on how Dominicans in the U.S. align their own identities both in contestation with the star's lack of authentic *dominicanidad* along with a seemingly contradictory desire to see *any* signs of *dominicanidad* within the star text.

Jeffrey Brown (1997), while investigating the homoerotic spectatorship of action star Jon Claude Van Damm, contends that "rather than the limited one-to-one theory of identification that has held considerable sway in cinema studies since the early 1970s, current practices of spectatorship require an understanding that attempt to account for the fluidity of identification and desire as it is projected into the narrative and onto the celebrity body" (123). The subjectivity of a spectator plays a significant role in the interpretation and identification with a celebrity text. Being able to negotiate texts in ways that both align and contest with those producing said texts, individual spectators and audiences from diverse subject positions form complex and varied relationships with celebrity texts. According to Brown, those who are part of marginalized groups—in his context the gay audience—have more ambivalent relationships with media texts, and their readings should be analyzed in a nuanced fashion. He contends that "moving beyond subcultural practices of reading against the grain, or of co-opting images from popular culture, we should begin to

consider how the images themselves, the celebrities themselves, *and* our own fluid understanding of these texts (as informed by voices traditionally on the fringe of society) construct not a blank but a multilevel slate" (Brown 1997: 141). Therefore, spectator subject position is a critical element to understanding the negotiation of celebrity texts, especially for those in marginalized groups such as Dominicans.[18]

U.S. Celebrity and the "Americanization" of Ethnic and Racialized Stars

Among the major complaints shared with me during interviews is that Saldana, Rodriguez, and other celebrities of Dominican heritage—such baseball player Sammy Sosa, actor Michelle Rodríguez, and rapper Trina—have "Americanized" and are therefore difficult to identify with based on a sense of shared *dominicanidad.* The "Americanization" of the ethnic star text or star image is nothing new in U.S. media. Contending that Hollywood in particular is an "assimilation machine," Diane Negra (2001) discusses the processes of star image creation among white ethnic female stars and suggests "Hollywood's representational model of assimilation relates to the way in which stardom in general involved rather deft negotiations of similarity and difference. Americanizing ethnic femininity does not so much entail a renunciation of ethnic attributes, as it does an attempt to codify and delineate those attributes that are meaningful within an American ideological system" (14). Drawing from hegemonic ideals and discourses that are based in notions of meritocracy and "the American

[18] For more see Jacqueline Bobo 1995 and Viviana Rojas 2010 for scholarship on reception among marginalized communities.

dream," success for a celebrity of any kind equates to an association with "Americanization" in that such success reinforces the presumed validity of the American dream. Assimilation to U.S. norms is seen as a fundamental step towards stardom, and as these norms are often steeped in notions of whiteness, ethnic celebrities, and their star images, are subsequently white-washed in the minds of the U.S. public. Yet there is still a noted Otherization occurring, not read as quite white or even, at times, vaguely white—what Negra refers to as off-white—ethnic and racialized stars are expected to act like white Americans without being given any real inclusion into hegemonic white America.

Negra's scholarship is useful when unpacking Dominican ambivalence to those figures of Dominican heritage that have been put through the "assimilation machine" of mediation. While to many Dominicans these celebrities are undeniably Dominican in some form, they are nonetheless assimilated and are therefore off-whitewashed into a mediated star image that is grounded in white norms. In the very achievement of success, in and of itself, Dominican stars are seen as Americanized. Suggesting that "our identification with stars is predicated on our perception that they are both like and unlike ourselves," Negra's (2001) articulation of off-white Hollywood is specifically useful to the Dominican context (13). Even while her scholarship only claims to speak for white-ethnic stars, it can easily be expanded to accommodate any celebrity that is somehow marked by ethnicity. The result of this process not only isolates the star from what might be thought of as their

community of origin but additionally isolates them from meaningful inclusion into hegemonic white society as they can never completely shed their ethnic skin. Seen as both traitors and outcasts, ethnic stars are put in a double-bind whereby they must choose success and celebrity over reification of their ethnic identity in an authentic enough fashion for their ethnic "home" communities. Saldana and Rodriguez, while repeatedly identified as a Dominican by those in my fieldwork study, have not been able to manage their burden of representation in an authentic enough way to sustain support from U.S. Dominicans.

Additionally, not only are Dominican stars marked by ethnicity generically, they are marked as Latina/o ethnics within dominant constructions of pan-ethnic *latinidad*. Mary Beltrán (2009) asserts that stardom, as a phenomenon and as a text, is a powerful social force that teaches and articulates notions of identity. Opportunity and success for Latina/o stars has been framed by not only a preference for an accepted "Latin Look,"[19]—one that positions Latina/os as in between the poles of whiteness and blackness while at the same time prioritizing those features seen as European in origin—but is also based on the changing and contested racial status of Latina/os in broader U.S. society. Moreover, Beltrán highlights the importance of industrial factors that further frame Latina/o opportunity in a way that both draws from and reinforces exclusionary and marginalizing Latina/o regimes of representation. Specifically, Beltrán draws on Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's (1994) conception of "ethnicities-in-relation":

[19] See Clara E. Rodriguez 1997

> Rather than speaking of cultural/racial groups in isolation, we speak of them "in relation," without ever suggesting that their positionings are identical. Rather than pitting a rotating chain of oppositional communities against a White European dominant (a strategy that privileges Whiteness if only as constant antagonist), we stress the horizontal and vertical links threading communities together in a conflictual network. Rather than recreating neat binarisms (Black/White, Native American/White) that ironically recenter Whiteness, while the "rest" who fit only awkwardly into such neat categories stand by as mere spectators, we try to address overlapping multiplicities of identity and affiliation (6).

Put another way, ethnoracial analyses should resist the diametric tendency that sees representations in isolation as if they were constructed within a localized vacuum. Therefore, when investigating the representations of Dominicans within U.S. media, they should be looked at in relation to other Latino groups, other ethnoracial groups, *and* the dominant Black/White paradigm within the U.S. Moreover, since identity among Dominicans in the U.S. is not limited to—or even primarily concerned with—ethnoracial identification, cultural heritage and nationality become more salient vectors of identification resulting in a contested relationship with "Americanization."

Furthermore, the mediation of Dominicans in the U.S. should be examined *in relation to* the ways in which other groups are mediated. Ana M. López (1991) asserts that while, undeniably, there are similarities between the ways in which Hollywood and mainstream media represent various ethnic and marginalized stars, there are nonetheless significant differences as well due to the context from within which they were deemed necessary and subsequently constructed. She posits that each ethnic group has its own unique relationship with Hollywood, and media scholars should "think

of Hollywood not as a simple reproducer of fixed and homogenous cultures or ideologies, but as a producer of some of the multiple discourses that intervene in, affirm, and contest the socioideological struggles of a given moment" (405). López and Shohat and Stam advocate a more nuanced analysis of mainstream media representations, one that is useful when investigating many of the subtleties of Dominican-identified audiences in the U.S.

It is with this framework that I enter into a discussion of those Dominican stars most discussed during my own fieldwork: Zoe Saldana and Alex Rodriguez.

ZOE SALDANA OR ZOË SALDAÑA?: AMBIGUOUS *DOMINICANIDAD* AND THE HOLLYWOOD STAR

Born Zoë Yadira Saldaña Nazario on July 19, 1978, in Passaic, New Jersey, to a Dominican father and Puerto Rican mother, the actor know to the U.S. as Zoe Saldana[20] has all the potential to become an emblem of the Dominican experience in the U.S. She and her family lived in Queens, NY, until the tragic death of her father when she was only nine years old. After her father died, she and her sisters were sent to live with her father's family in the Dominican Republic. There her grandparents raised her and her sisters, providing Saldana with a physical and cultural connection to the island—one of which she speaks frequently. Furthermore, it was in the Dominican Republic that she

[20] As will be discussed shortly, the spelling of Saldana's name is inconsistent. This particular spelling is what is used on her IMDb.com page and the spelling that appears most frequently in her professional life. I will be using the un-accented spelling "Zoe Saldana" throughout the dissertation. While this is done as an attempt to remain neutral on imposing a subjectivity onto her, I do acknowledge that this decision is not entirely politically neutral and can be read as potentially problematic

first studied dance—a skill that proved most helpful landing her first major film role as a ballerina in the film *Center Stage* (dir. Nicholas Hytner, 2000). At seventeen Saldana returned to New York City to pursue a career in dance and theater, joining the youth performance troupe FACES Theater Co. and the New York Youth Theater. Following her first credited role in an episode of *Law & Order* (1990-2010, NBC) in 1999, Saldana has achieved mainstream U.S. success through appearing in a myriad of films.

Through a survey of Saldana's roles, I situate my audience reception study within a critical discursive and textual analysis of some of her films. Specifically, I directly discuss her first major film role in *Center Stage*, *The Losers* (dir. Sylvain White, 2010) as one of the few films which cast Saldana as (Afro)Latina, and the black-cast African American niche industry film *Premium* (dir. Pete Chatmon, 2006). The range of Saldana's work demonstrates her strategic ethnoracial flexibility. She has been cast as Latina, Afro-Latina, African American/Black, and, interestingly enough, alien. While such a strategy never leaves her short of film roles, it does make it difficult for audiences to ethnoracially categorized her. Furthermore, by distancing herself from any specific ethnoracial label, Saldana has forfeited her claim to *dominicanidad* and has alienated some in the Dominican community as a result. In a fashion akin to the criticisms levied toward Mexican-American boxer Oscar de la Hoya discussed by Fernando Delgado (2005)—who examines how through de la Hoya's mainstream success both his masculinity and Mexican-ness was put into question—Saldana's Dominican-ness is also contested.

After examining the various ways in which she has been positioned within the roles she is cast, I argue that her self-fashioning as an ethnoracial moving target has been interpreted by U.S. Dominicans as a deliberate distancing from her Dominican heritage and an affront to *dominicanidad*. Notably, a brief linguistic analysis (Baltes 1991; Bucholtz & Hall 2003) of the professional spelling of her name without Spanish accenting—Saldana versus Saldaña—highlights a more or less deliberate cultural distancing. However, while her indulgence in post-racial discourses might have made her a mainstream star, her disavowel of a specific ethnoracial characterization has created a distance between her and U.S. Dominican communities. Furthermore, Saldana is ultimately unable to avoid practices of reading the racialized body that would associate her with blackness in both embodied and representational ways.

Zoe Saldana's Cinematic Oeuvre

Saldana was cast as Eva Rodríguez, the rough around the edges (Afro)Latina ballet dancer, in her first widely distributed studio film *Center Stage*. Playing a supporting, but nonetheless stand-out, character, Saldana's character both has a Latino name and occasionally speaks Spanish in the film. Set in the cut-throat world of a prestigious ballet academy modeled on the New York City Ballet's training school, School of American Ballet, a world often marked by its whiteness, Eva is all the more noticeable against the backdrop of normative whiteness. Specifically, in a scene towards the beginning of the film, Eva

arrives late to class with an attitude, out of dress code (pink tights and black leotard), and without her hair styled in the mandatory bun. Her Otherness is written on her body both through her skin tone and through her costuming—Eva does not "belong" in this space. The film also associates Eva with Caribbean culture when she suggests some of the students take a break from their rigorous classes to go to a salsa club for "some fun." Again reminding the audience that Eva is not only the Other through the comparatively crude language that peppers her dialogue and her resistance to authority figures, she fundamentally comes from a different cultural space. In what is supposed to be the scene where Eva finally is vindicated and shown in the full glory of her dancing abilities, the use of visual contrast is once more deployed to mark her as Other. As the white dancers perform in black costumes, Eva, who was not originally supposed to dance the principle role, surprises everyone and comes out on stage wearing all white. The difference in costuming glares a spotlight on Eva's body as foreign even while simultaneously displaying her superior mastery of the European art form of classical ballet (Figure 1.1). As what is often credited as her breakout role, it seemed to set the tone for how mainstream U.S. was instructed to read her throughout her body of work: as racially Other, in this case (Afro)Latina. However, *Center Stage* is one of only a few films in which Saldana has been cast as explicitly Latina—others include *The Losers* (dir. Sylvain White, 2010) and *Colombiana* (dir. Olivier Megaton, 2011)—and, as such, limits its influence on how audience interpret her star text and the subsequent characters she has portrayed.

Figure 1.1: Zoe Saldana as Eva in *Center Stage* (dir. Nicholas Hytner, 2000)

The action adventure film *The Losers* offers a rare opportunity to read Saldana as Afro-Latina. The film follows the gang of "Losers" headed by former military officer Clay (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) and their plot to seek revenge and take down the CIA man who framed them for a failed mission in Bolivia. Assisting them in their endeavor is Aisha (Saldana), the daughter of the Bolivian drug lord involved in that botched mission, a fact uncovered toward the end of the film. As the daughter of a Bolivian, Aisha is clearly Latina. Furthermore, her skin color is dark enough to be read as being of African descent. In the combination of these two factors is an acknowledgement of the possibility for one to be both Latina/o and of African descent. However, characters like Aisha are relatively rare within Hollywood narratives and this type of racial mixture seems to be isolated to Latin America, as something that might only be common there.

Just as in Classical Hollywood, the mixed race actor is placed within exotic locals, anchoring such type of miscegenation firmly outside of the U.S. By abjecting the racially mixed figure into the space of the Other, U.S. media is able to both indulge in the pleasure and excitement that frames the appeal of the mixed-raced body while at the same time avoid the baggage such a figure brings within U.S. hegemonic ethnoracial discourses. Therefore it is telling that location is the primary element that strings her various (Afro)Latina roles together; Saldana's mixed-race body is only understood as Afro-Latina within the context that peoples in those parts of the world have an overt legacy of racial mixture. Whether that is Latin America, the Caribbean, or New York City, a "safe" space for Afro-Latina/o subjectivity is opened up. This thinking is demonstrated through Hollywood's casting of Saldana; in those places already connoted with racial mixture, her *afrolatinidad* is unproblematic, yet in those spaces that such mixture is invisible, exnominated, taboo, Saldana has been cast according to more rigid practices of hypodescent.

Furthermore, based on industrial practices that still heavily rely on normative conceptualizations of the raced body rooted in White/Black racial binary (Nakashima 1992; Dogbovie 2007; Beltrán & Fojas 2008), Saldana has been cast as Black/African American in roughly half of her roles. Those who participated in my interviews often mentioned this casting trend, Ciel,[21] for instance, told me "Zoe Saldana, she plays characters as if she wasn't a Spanish speaker, as if she was Black." Films such as

[21] Interview conducted on June 10, 2013 with a U.S.-born woman in her mid-twenties.

Drumline (dir. Charles Stone III, 2002), *Guess Who* (dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2005), *Death at a Funeral* (dir. Neil LaBute, 2010), and the forthcoming Nina Simon biopic *Nina* (dir. Cynthia Mort)—which I will directly address later on in this chapter—place her among primarily Black casts, within a genre of African American films, and portraying characters with un-ethnically connoted names. One such film, *Premium*, is the story of struggling actor Cool (Dorian Missick) and his endeavor to win back the love of his life, Charli (Saldana), who is engaged to another man. The majority of the characters in the film are read as African American, made even more explicit through the film's critique of stereotypical African American representations. At one point in the film, Cool, when talking about Charli and her fiancé being "two Black people in love," dismisses any question of Charli's racialization and in doing so confirms her racial reading as African American. Saldana's Caribbean background is completely erased, where the only racial markers are Black ones. This is consistent with most of Saldana's other films, where she can primarily be read as Black.

As a particularly telling caveat, it is important to note that Saldana has also been cast as an alien in several Hollywood blockbusters—*Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009) and its upcoming sequels and Marvel Comic's *Guardians of the Galaxy* (dir. James Gunn, 2014). While scholars such as Daniel Bernardi (1997) have discussed the generic convention of using aliens in allegorical ways within science fiction, the sheer frequency of these roles in Saldana's career milieu gestures toward something more complex. The increasingly common trend of casting

mixed-race and racially ambiguous actors as literally out of this world—as their existence in future and non-U.S./non-Earth based realities seems to be less ideologically problematic—demonstrates Hollywood's continued discomfort with the positionality of actors that challenge dominant U.S. racial thinking. The Hollywood imaginary of this world does not include non-normatively racially situated actors; therefore, within this reasoning, they make perfect sense being placed in worlds and time periods that are not our own. LeiLani Nishime (2005) posits that Hollywood has "simply rewritten the terms of the race debate and have taken cover under the umbrella of generic imperatives" (Nishimi 2005, pp. 36). It is not difficult to see why bodies of color are more commonly represented within the science fiction genre, a genre that is intended to transport audiences into a fantasy world that does not explicitly challenge ideologies that they are reluctant to reconsider. Saldana's ambiguity is more easily dealt with not in a representation of the world we are supposedly currently living in but a reality that does not have to explain her inclusion. But where does such an exclusion from less science-fictionalized spaces leave Saldana and U.S. Dominicans who would be compelled to identify with her?

Saldana and (In)Authentic *dominicanidad*

While Saldana's casting history is reasonably diverse and has provided her with quite a bit of commercial success, her career has, nonetheless, done little in the way of introducing Dominicans to a

mainstream audience. Furthermore, her Hollywood success is not only looked on critically by those with whom I spoke but was often categorized as a type of betrayal. In their analysis of the emotive labor of celebrities, Heather Nuun and Anita Biressi (2010) discuss the ways scandalized stars attempt to rework their image. While discussing celebrities that have "betrayed the trust" of the public in terms of breaking *societal* norms or expectations, the same notion of betrayal can be used to understand those figures of Dominican heritage who break with *cultural* norms and expectations of their ethnic community. In what truly is a re-articulation of Hall's "burden of representation," Nuun and Biressi argue that "the celebrity figure spans the fields of the individual and the collective, the popular and the political, and thereby offers a model of personal success which reinforced the idea of individual achievement and social success as attainable by all" (49).

Within the ideological dimensions of U.S. stardom, Dominican celebrities' success comes at the potential loss of ethnic authenticity and community cultural trust. Many of those I interviewed shared a similar suspicion with Gabriela[22] who suggested that it is not that there are no Dominicans in U.S. popular culture, but "For [her] they are basically invisible because those that are there play other characters…other races." Dominican stars, through the (off)white-washing of popular media assimilation, fail at the burden placed on them because they are a model of success that is predicated on loss of authentic *dominicanidad*. As reflected in sentiments expressed by both those I

[22] From interview conducted on June 7, 2013 with a Dominican-born U.S. citizen in her mid-twenties.

interviewed during my fieldwork and those shared by online forum commenters, Dominicans in the U.S. are hesitant to identify with celebrities of Dominican heritage and feel a sense of cultural betrayal in what many see as neglect to highlight their Dominican roots.

In fact, many of the U.S.-born Dominicans I interviewed insisted that they actually identify more with non-Dominican Latina/o celebrities with whom they might not share a national heritage but, nonetheless, feel that they are a more authentic representation of *latinidad* within a pan-Latino framework. Carmen[23] told me, "I cannot think of any Dominicans in media I identify with, usually more Latinos in general. People like Shakira, Eva Mendes, and America Ferrera, those are the ones I identify with." I contend that this type of pan-Latino identification occurs for two reasons: (1) there are merely more non-Dominican Latina/o stars in both number and range of representation, lessening the burden of representation for each, and (2) aligning themselves with a more inclusive identity category based on notions of cultural similarity and shared life experiences is a strategy for negotiating identity within a reality in which Dominicans are scarcely included.

Latino pan-ethnicity is not merely a politically motivated process of homogenization, it is also an identity paradigm that is porous, flexible, and manipulative. On one hand, pan-*latinidad* works to generalize across diverse Latino populations, yet on the other, its umbrella inclusivity provides the opportunity to opt-in

[23] From interview conducted on July 10, 2013 with U.S.-born Dominican-American in her late twenties.

and opt-out based on what is most beneficial at that time. Moreover, as Vicki Mayer (2004) suggests, "Panlatinidad thus walks a line between describing the complex interweaving of cultures in economic, political, and social contexts and rendering these invisible" (115). Therefore, while Dominican inclusion in representations of pan-*latinidad* may be few and far between, there is a space within this construct for Dominicans in the U.S. to carve out a sense of ethnic identification with stars that might not be Dominican but are seen as "authentically" Latina/o. This, however, does not provide a substitute for representations of *dominicanidad*. As Mayer warns, ethnically specific identity is at risk of being rendered invisible without representations of *dominicanidad* in mainstream U.S. film that are seen as identifiable and "authentic" to U.S. Dominicans. Therefore, stars of Dominican heritage, like Saldana, are held to a higher standard and are expected to express a form of *dominicanidad* with which Dominicans in the U.S. can identify.

For Dominicans in NYC, Saldana's life and image are not relatable and even harder to identify with. For many of those with whom I spoke, Saldana is not a member of their community, rather a celebrity entrenched in Hollywood glamour and mainstream U.S. media culture. During one of my interviews, Emmanuel[24] disparagingly suggested that "she is one of those" who might be Dominican by heritage but have become a product of the U.S. cultural environment. Others simply could not see themselves represented in her, with Dania[25] in particular maintaining, "That's just not

[24] Interview conducted on June 6, 2013 with Dominican-born U.S. citizen in his early thirties.

me." From the way Saldana looked to her Hollywood lifestyle, the Dominicans I spoke with simply felt that they did not share with her the same *dominicanidad*. Still others were more critical of her, chastising her as one who had forgotten her roots, feeling that she has intentionally hidden her Dominican heritage from her public persona, opting instead to sustain and encourage an ambiguous characterization. According to Luis[26], "She has fallen off into that Americanization. It could be of her own fault, or the pressures she has succumbed to. But for me, it kinda takes away the identity of who you are." From disappointment to disavowal, my interviewees produced a sense of distancing from Saldana as a potential representative of their community.

What's In A Name?: The Connotations of Dropping the *Enye*

When investigating matters of Dominican authenticity, much can be gathered based solely on how Saldana's name is spelled. Many of my interviewees specifically mentioned the removal of Spanish accents when her name appears in mainstream media. In discussing the reasons Saldana did not represent *dominicanidad*, Tina[27] mentioned "I think it is weird that nobody ever spells her name with an *enye*, you would think that would be important to her." The question of to "ñ" or not to "ñ" seems to visibly reflect how her subjectivity is being interpreted within her star text. There seems to be no consistency in the manner in which the U.S. popular press spells Saldana's

[25] Interview conducted on June 11, 2013 with 21 year old U.S.-born woman.
[26] Interview conducted on June 11, 2013 with U.S.-born man in his late twenties.
[27] Interview conducted on July 18, 2013 with U.S.-born woman in her early twenties.

name, although when it appears in the Dominican press it is usually spelled "Saldaña." It is not uncommon for *enyes* (ñ) and accents to be dropped when Spanish names and words are used in the U.S. in the context of English speakers as "English, unlike Spanish, French, or German, is a language that manages to get along with practically no diacritical marks—no accents, no cedillas, no enyes, no umlauts, such as some other languages require—and most American fonts of type, particularly display type, simply do not have these extras" (Wood 1981: 401). However, the "ñ" itself is both politically loaded and imbued with Latino associations, making the choice of whether or not it is used a reflection of the writer's interpretation of Saldana's identity. What might be read as grammatical arbitrariness to some is, in actuality, a phenomenon deeply rooted in U.S. hegemonic racial and ethnic ideologies. The politics embedded within language and semiotics are clearly observable in the confusion over the spelling of Saldana's name and, I argue, are purposefully manipulated based on which media source is discussing her. For example, *Latina* magazine almost always uses the "ñ" when spelling her name while more mainstream sources frequently leave it out. It serves *Latina*'s purposes—whose primary audience is composed of U.S. Latinas and focuses on issues of Latina femininity—to enhance Saldana's claim to *latinidad*, prompting them to encourage their readers to identify with her as a Latina, while mainstream sources have no such political agenda or mission.

While it is certainly true that, as Michael Aceto (2002) argues, "many immigrants in the USA have Anglicized their names

or adopted Anglophone names for exclusive use among English speakers, while maintaining original or ethnic names for ingroup usage" (603), it is difficult to suggest that Saldana uses the unaccented spelling of her name exclusively in English-speaking contexts. What is clear, however, is that the meaning inherent in removing the accent(s) from the spelling of her name in her professional life bleeds into Dominican and mainstream interpretations of how she self-identifies. Names, even individual proper names, signify certain connotations. Linguist Paul Baltes (1991) posits that while proper names are primarily used to reference a specific individual(s), to denote them in semiological terms, they function on another level of signification where "names suggest descriptions regardless of their referential function" (75). He discusses how certain names have a culturally produced connotative meaning—for example "Bertha" implies a large woman and "Vinnie" an Italian mobster—and, therefore, "stereotypes are subsumed under some representative name and then the name may be used to predicate specific features" (Baltes 1991: 83).

I claim that accented names, and the subsequent reasoning behind removing those accents, fall under the same category. Use of accents in the spelling of a name visually and culturally marks the referent of that name and ties them both to a kind of foreign-ness in the U.S. context and often a separate language identity—in this case Spanish speaking. Linguistic Anthropologists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2003) contend that "beliefs about language are also often beliefs about speakers," as names in a "marked" language—in this instance

Spanish is a “marked” language in a primarily English speaking society—are both referential and contextual (379). Just as speaking Spanish marks the individual with certain cultural connotations so does using the accented spelling of one’s name. They further suggest that “language, as a fundamental resource for cultural production, is hence also a fundamental resource for identity production” (Bucholtz & Hall 2003: 382). It seems that names, and the choice to accent them or not, can influence the way an individual is identified. By removing the accent(s) from her name, Saldana has made herself even more ambiguous, regardless of whether this was done for personal or professional reasons. In constituting her identity in this ambiguous fashion, the U.S. Dominican community interprets this as Saldana making a statement about her identity that is seen as an affront to their desire to retain and project a sense of *dominicanidad*.

“I Am Just Zoe”: Zoe Saldana as a Raced Post-Racial Figure

Saldana told *Latina* magazine’s Amaris Castillo (2013), “I'm not defined by sex, I'm not defined by race, I'm not defined by nationality, I'm Zoe," (Latina.com). Saldana has made many similar statements, ones that allude to an unspecified racial or ethnic subjectivity while at the same time disavowing any particular claim to identification. This is but one message U.S. audiences receive from Saldana, a refusal to be subsumed into any one category. However, my survey of her popular press coverage reveals that her real Hollywood strategy entails claiming all potential categories of identification (Black, Latina, African American,

dominicana) in one publication and then turning around and saying she cannot be categorized in the next. This strategy *may* be an attempt to avoid Latina type-casting. As other scholars have discussed, many Latina roles rely heavily on the fiery Latina stereotype, revealing the intersectional connotation that aligns ethnic identity with a certain sexualized construction of Latina femininity (Rodriguez 1997; Berg 2002; Beltrán 2009). Angharad N. Valdivia (2000) posits that in the case of representational Latina femininity "we get the sexually out of control and utterly colorful spitfire, an image quite specific to Latinas" (92). Instead, Saldana has made her subjectivity into a moving target, a seminal example of Stuart Hall's articulation of the "floating signifier" of racial or ethnic identity. A manipulability made possible, as Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2010) argues, based on how Latinas are "ambiguously coded as ethnic and racial, providing for a more flexible performance of identity that does not always cohere to commonsense biological definitions of ethnicity or phenotypic definitions of race" (6). In terms of a strategy for Hollywood survival, it seems to be working well for her. Yet those that would identify with her subjectivity based on a shared sense of *dominicanidad* have something extra at stake. And Saldana's refusal to project her *dominicanidad* in a way that would be read as authentic for the U.S. Dominican community often feels like betrayal.

Maybe this confusion and ambivalence is merely a result of post-racial and colorblind politics? Molina-Guzmán (2013) argues, "During a 'post-racial' moment where race and ethnicity are no longer

supposed to matter, the casting politics surrounding black Latina/o actors produce a triple-burden across gender, ethnic, and racial barriers that is increasingly difficult to navigate" (flowtv.org). The rhetoric Saldana herself uses is rooted in notions of colorblind politics, claiming:

> I grew up in Queens and the Dominican Republic. It wasn't easy, s*** was going on. But the kind of world that we had indoors, that my mom created for us, makes more sense to this day than what is out there. I would come home from school and go, "Mami, what am I? You know, cause I'm getting all kinds of things and people are mean." And Mami would look at me and go, "You're Zoe." And I'd go, "I know, Mami, but what am I?" and she would look at me and say, "You're my daughter, your grandma's granddaughter, you're Zoe" (quoted in Hernandez April 2, 2013: Latina.com).

Because of the ambiguity and confusion related to her racial and ethnic subjectivity, Saldana, as a result, ascribes to her mother's childhood intervention and often insists on a colorblind career strategy. Yet this is only one half of the colorblind post-racial coin. On the other side of ambiguity is flexibility. Saldana "navigates an identity that is fluid, complicated and not connected to physical appearance" (Molina-Guzmán 2013: flowtv.org). She labors to manipulate colorblind politics and promote an ambiguous or flexible star image that can privilege one identification over the others at any point, depending on the role in which she is cast at that moment in her career trajectory.

However, career strategy and post-racial good intentions aside, just because Saldana says it is not important to define her race does not mean that audiences can no longer see it. Kristen Warner (2014) contends that "As a post-racial society, colorblindness and diversity exist in tension with the other and require both the seeing

and the not seeing of race" (14). Actors of color can identify themselves in the press however they chose, but, ultimately, just as claiming a post-racial society does not equate to the end of racism, audiences will continue to read race onto their bodies. Moreover, as Kent A. Ono (2010) implores, "The strategic project of postracism, as unconscious as it often is, is to create a context in which messages that justify disavowal of racism undermine consciousness of racism and racism's historical effect" (229). Saldana cannot fully escape audiences racially reading her, but she can exploit Hollywood industrial paradigms of post-raciality—even if by doing so it means she must sacrifice some of her claims to *dominicanidad*.

As an example indicative of the type of discourse that surrounds Saldana, a stream of comments responding to an online article announcing the presence of two Dominican actresses in the mega-blockbuster *Avatar* elucidates the levels of ambivalence to Saldana's *dominicanidad*. A brief announcement on Dominicantoday.com, a news website based in the Dominican Republic that provides news for Dominicans that speak English, intended to highlight the news-worthy quality of the casting of two actresses of Dominican heritage (Zoe Saldana and Michelle Rodriguez). Yet many of the responses focused on the CGI of the film, a result that angered a couple readers. What this seems to reveal is not only ambivalence to the two actresses of Dominican origin, but a lack of identification with the stars as members of a larger Dominican community. In reaction to the flow of discussion that was being generated by this announcement, one

participant tried to wrangle the conversation in what they saw was the intended direction by posting “the spirit here is not to hail or denote the CGI, script, ect... the object here is to denote Dominican actresses or actors. period!” In response to this interjection, another participant posted: “Nobody is criticizing any Dominicans in this thread.” Exactly, those posting comments (many of whom are located in the Dominican Republic) do not see a significant identification between their *dominicanidad* and Saldana and Rodriguez. This is just another Hollywood film to them, a Hollywood film with Hollywood actresses. It is not, presumably, a representation of their community or an expression of Dominican culture. It is only when they are reprimanded for missing the point of Dominicantoday.com’s announcement that they even seem to acknowledge the Hollywood industrial significance of the casting. Although this particular discussion ends with a flippant dismissal, the broader discussion of Saldana’s place in Hollywood and her (in)authentic *dominicanidad* continues on countless other websites.

Arguably the best example of Saldana’s contested ethnoracial identity is demonstrated in the controversy around her casting as African American musician and activist Nina Simone.[28] Again in *Latina* magazine, Saldana is quoted saying "Let me tell you, if Elizabeth Taylor can be Cleopatra, I can be Nina — I'm sorry. It doesn't matter how much backlash I will get for it. I will honor and respect my black community because that's who I am" (Hernandez 2013, Latina.com). While this statement does not

[28] According *Shadow and Act* (2014) the film was “In development for at least 5 years, Mary J. Blige was initially attached to star in the film, but she was eventually replaced by Saldana who brought more international box office gravitas to the production” (http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact).

account for Hollywood industrial history and the practice of using white actors in brown-face, it is indicative of Saldana's approach to the roles she takes on and her flexible self-racialization. Yet regardless of how Saldana justifies her choices to play a specific character or not, her justification does not always translate to audiences. In a particular Latina.com discussion thread containing reactions to Saldana's casting as Nina Simone, posters share conflicting sentiments and demonstrate how Saldana's star text creates a space for negotiating racial and ethnic identity. One participant posted:

> This is typical Hollywood. Even though Zoe is Afro Latina I can understand why African Americans are a bit upset at this pic. It is nothing personal but I think [there] are enough talented African Americans to play this part. Yes, Zoe is a Black Hispanic but African Americans feel their culture differs from Afro Hispanic/Latino culture (Latina.com 2012).

While most of the other participants generally agreed with the sentiment expressed here, others mindfully contested it. For example, one opposing response to this position argued:

> Zoe is black-latina just like there are black-Americans. I understand this double edge sword of being Afro Latino and it sucks socially having people not understand what a black Latino is or even beleive [sic] it. HOWEVER this shouldn't be a case about her culture it should be a discourse about whether she resembles [Simone] or not. Jennifer Lopez played a Mexican american, i love Zoe i think she can take on the physical look, she [is] an actress for goodness sake have we not seen other actors and actreses [sic] transform for the silver screen.

This post demonstrates not only a recognition of racial and ethnic nuance but also an understanding of how this usually plays out within ideologies of the racialized body. However, another post elucidates how industrial practices and the politics of representation converge in this

particular case, arguing that “Hollywood must think ‘People think that Nina Simone and Zoe Saldana are both Black people. No one will ever notice they look very different’." It is the observation of this participant that mainstream audiences conflate blackness under an umbrella of skin tone, rooted in the normative logic of hypodescent.

A lot is at stake in this discussion thread, from contesting the idea of an inherent black subject to industrial practices of colorism. Molina-Guzmán (2013) takes on the complicated politics involved in Saldana’s casting as Simone, contending, “It is Saldana’s complex desire, willingness and ability to occupy and claim a Latina ethnic identity and a US black racial identity that is at center of the discomfort surrounding Saldana’s performance of Simone” (flowtv.com). U.S. hegemonic constructions of race and ethnicity place blackness and *latinidad* in mutually exclusive categories. Therefore, when Saldana claims to be both, she is performing what Molina-Guzmán suggests is a “radical identity.” Saldana’s identity is “radical” because it is a moving target where she is at once all of these identities but also none of them. It is because she rejects identifying along paradigms of racial thinking that are still informed by an outdated biological determinist mindset that she can justify portraying characters from across the racial spectrum as opposed to being limited to one ethnoracial label. Saldana is not stuck in one category; she travels between them with a fluidity made possible through her navigation of colorblind and post-racial discourses. Making visible the constructed nature of this categorization produces the type of messy identification and ambivalence illuminated within the previous

discussion thread. Saldana's strategy to be all and yet none challenges preconceived notions of ethnoracial identification, yet, it also isolates her from the Dominican community, a community that desperately desires to have *dominicanidad* represented in the U.S., but only if is done authentically. The kind of disruptive discursive struggle that results from such online discussions will be discussed further in Chapter Three. For now, what emerges from this handful of examples is the precarious nature of practices of identification within the U.S., practices that are further contested in relation to the star text of Alex Rodriguez.

ALEX RODRIGUEZ: A-ROD'S "AMERICANIZED" PERSONA

In addition to frequent mentions of Zoe Saldana, Alex Rodriguez was brought up in nearly all of my interviews. Much like Saldana, Rodriguez has faced a contentious attitude from the U.S. Dominican community, and his celebrity is just as polemical. Moreover, unlike Saldana, who has achieved little negative mainstream reception, Rodriguez receives criticism from both the mainstream and the Dominican community. Furthermore, while the operations of sport celebrity are similar in many ways to that of media stars and other types of mainstream celebrities, there are a few nuances involved in sports celebrity that are important to acknowledge. Here I refer to the work of Gill Lines (2010), who not only provides a literature review of sports-based celebrity but explains sports star-audience relationships. In his review of the scholarship on sports celebrity he explains that:

> The characterization of sport stars affords a central focus across both sports spectacle and narrative and celebrity sport stars images are communicated through a vast array of media products (Connel, 1992; Rowe, 1995; Whannel, 1992, 1998b and Whannel and Wellard, 1995). As their celebrity status grows, for some, the audience knows as much, if not more, about their personal lives as their sporting endeavours (Lines 2010: 286).

The playing of the game is the primary source of spectatorship for sports stars, complicating how their celebrity works as they are framed within the notion of "real life" and not tied to associations of "scriptedness" or acting in the exhibition of their work. Even when their work is broadcast it is rooted in a sense of realness that other media broadcasts are not so easily associated with. Lines suggests:

> Sports stars are real in the sense that they perform live under unpredictable sporting conditions over which apparently the media has little control. Yet, the nature of what the reader gets to see, hear and read about is determined and amplified by camera angles, replays, gossip columns, photographic images, chat shows and other such professional practices which ensure that the sport star image develops through selected constructions of reality (287).

The actual work of playing sports is not the only coverage or exposure audiences have to these sports celebrities, however. Sports stars become figures and even icons in popular culture and various mainstream and niche media. It is not just their athletic performance that matters in audience interpretation of these figures, it is also their personal lives, their behaviors outside of the work of playing ball, and the manner and degree in which they receive coverage within and outside of the space of sports spectatorship. According to Lines, "what the audience know about and identify with certain sports stars is closely associated with the information that the media professional has selected to bring to

their attention" (300). Put simply, opinions of sports stars are not merely based on how well they play the game but involve audience negotiations of the intertextual representation of the star text.

The star text of a sports celebrity operates much like it does for other celebrities, wherein a narrative is built through the various media sources that cover their lives and careers. Moreover, sports stars are usually framed within the highly gendered narrative of the "hero," and expected to uphold cultural constructions of ideal masculinity. Yet, wherever there are heroes, there are also villains. The mediated narrative that is constructed within the sports star text utilizes discourses rooted in the hero/villain binary where "while condemning bad behavior in sports stars, the media actually thrives on exposing it in order to ensure its commercial success and interest to its readers" (Lines 2010: 294). Furthermore, media narratives can easily transform the same sports star from a hero to a villain in one cover-story or sports commentator opinion. A sports celebrity is more than their field/court statistics; the narrative(s) promoted by the media also frame them.

Lines (2010) posits, as a generalization, that "sports heroes are clearly promoted by the media as a source of national pride and function to represent national qualities, traditions and distinctions" (288). And while this might be more true in some cultures over others, it is certainly true for both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. A few years ago the *Calgary Herald* published a piece on Dominicans and baseball citing the significant presence of Dominican

baseball players in the U.S. and contending that,

> [If] you've ever been to this sun-drenched country, you're likely not surprised. There are all levels of baseball played all over the place. It's a favorite sport and national passion. In fact, at any given time, there can be 800,000 kids playing organized baseball in the DR. That's quite a number, considering the country's population is only 10 million or so (calgaryherald.com, September 25, 2011).

A significant part of Dominican culture, baseball and its stars are not only sources of national pride but a source of potential exposure to Dominican subjects for a U.S. mainstream audience. Dominican scholar Nelson Santana (2013) mentions that "after White Americans, Dominicans comprise the second largest group of baseball players—and the world is taking note. This year the Dominican Republic won the 2013 World Baseball Classic (WBC)" (flowtv.org). Baseball is integral to the Dominican experience on the Island and abroad, making baseball stars household names. As assumed pillars of *dominicanidad*, the lives and careers of Dominican baseball celebrities are closely followed by Dominicans in the U.S. As such, they are burdened with representing the Dominican community, a task that some are seen as handling better than others.

Furthermore, baseball has played a significant role in both historical and contemporary connections between the U.S. and the Spanish Caribbean more broadly, and the Dominican Republic more specifically. The utilization and dependency on Caribbean baseball talent has been a cornerstone of U.S. baseball as an institution, and the sport has been simultaneously translated syncretically into Caribbean culture. Adrian Burgos (2005) labors to distinguish the nuances within the relationships among baseball, the U.S., and Latin American

and Spanish Caribbean players, contending that unlike the associations baseball has in areas that are part of what might be considered the American empire, "Due to the game's longer history in Cuba and other parts of the Spanish-speaking Americas, Latinos would infuse baseball with their own meaning[s] about nation, gender, and race that distinguished this scene" (5). Pedro Julio Santana (a Dominican relating his experience of the U.S. military occupation of the Dominican Republic in the early 20th century) expressed "baseball is the greatest thing that the U.S. has given us and other countries of the Caribbean. They have not given us anything else that, in my opinion, is of any value, but baseball!" (as quoted in Burgos 1997: 75-76). It is not that Dominicans reject the history of baseball in the U.S., but they have developed their own relationship with the sport independently from the U.S. in culturally specific ways.

Caribbean and Latino ballplayers have long been transversing borders to pursue the sport, creating networks of migration and cultural exchange in the process. According to Burgos (2005):

> In the contemporary era even more Major League organizations have turned to the Dominican Republic and Venezuela in their search to find prospects as cheaply as possible and to offset the high cost of developing North American players and signing superstar free agents. These practices link the history of the hundreds of Latinos who have performed in the Majors in the integrated era with those who entered the U.S. playing fields during Jim Crow (23).

Beginning during the era of professional baseball regulated by codes of segregation that prohibited "Black" players from Major League Baseball and the subsequent creation of Negro Leagues, Caribbean players would play in the U.S. season and then return to the

islands to play in the leagues there, cultivating careers that spanned Transatlantic borders. Navigating back and forth between two separately defined cultural spaces, "These ballplayers empowered themselves through their networks that allowed them to make informed and calculated decisions as Transatlantic residents, thereby avoiding certain pitfalls and creating alternate means" (Burgos 1997: 80).

Rodriguez builds on a legacy of Latino ballplayers who consciously navigated U.S. racial ideology and practices to expand their careers, improve their status, and obtain privileges in the U.S. The way Caribbean baseball players have sustained a fluid process of identification suggests that conforming to U.S. racial ideologies as well as national alliances and cultural identity was something uniquely available in the realm of baseball. Players would navigate the terrain based on their individual positionality in order to produce the most success for themselves within baseball's diasporic conditions.

A-Rod: The Damned Yankee

A much contested figure, Alex Enmanuel Rodriguez (aka A-Rod), is both loved and resented by Dominicans in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. Rodriguez was born on July 27, 1975, in NYC, were he lived with his two older siblings and Dominican-born parents until he was four years old. His family then returned to the Dominican Republic, and that is where he learned to play baseball. When Rodriguez was eight years old his family moved to Miami where he continued to play baseball and achieve success on the field. Rodriguez's Major

League Baseball (MLB) debut was July 8, 1994, playing for the Seattle Mariners. After his stint with the Mariners, Rodriguez went on to play with the Texas Rangers before making his final move to the New York Yankees. His blockbuster trade to the Yankees in 2004 was not only big news in the sporting world but a dream fulfilled for Rodriguez who, like many other Dominican players, had always wished to return to play in NYC, the city of his birth.

As one of the biggest names in U.S. baseball, Alex Rodriguez is a polarizing figure in the Dominican community. When asked to identify Dominicans known to mainstream U.S., Gabriela joked "I would like to say Alex Rodriguez, but he says that he is American." More than anything, Dominicans in the U.S. are disappointed with Rodriguez and his seemingly purposeful distancing from his own *dominicanidad*. Luis expressed:

> From what I have seen, they always try to make them seem more 'American'…As he was coming up, even when I was younger, he was my favorite player. But what I didn't ever like was that I knew he was Dominican but they even went so far as to change his name to A-Rod. Cutting the Rodriguez completely out. But I understand it is a business thing. But it is cutting yourself out of who you really are…This is what I think happens to all Dominicans that become popular.

A particularly bitter subject for U.S. Dominicans is Rodriguez's "snub" of the Dominican National Team who invited him to play for them during the 2006 World Baseball Classic. For many, such a move was emblematic of the baseball star's desire to distance himself from the Dominican community. Rodriguez's star image in mainstream U.S. media reflects the paradigm of "Americanization" that those who I interviewed spoke of.

Whether the "A-Rod" brand was self-created or a product of the U.S. star making machine, Brandmakernews.com hits the nail on the head when they suggest:

> When the phrase "New York Yankees" is mentioned these days, it's pretty hard not to think of Alexander Emmanuel Rodriguez—third baseman for the New York Major League baseball team. Better known to his legions of fans as "A-Rod"—the Dominican baseball star is well-known for his lively reputation both on and off the field. Aside from his informal "brand" as a Ladies' Man, Alex Rodriguez is known for being one of the best all-around baseball players of all time…Sure, you could say that A-Rod's amazing baseball record precedes any post locker room gossip. But it is more than likely the third baseman's saucy repute that has made him one of the biggest sports superstars in the world (August 10, 2010).

As "A-Rod," Rodriguez is a topic of interest for sports fans, media gossip enthusiasts, and swooning spectators alike. It is in the combination of factors in his public persona that make Rodriguez more than your run of the mill baseball player, instead positioning him as a preeminent sports superstar—whether you like him or not.

Rodriguez's "Americanized" rebranding is taken as a slight to Dominican culture and identification, a slight that some can overlook while many others cannot. He becomes the personification for an assimilationist process that erases Dominican cultural identification in the quest of success in the U.S. Placing this "Americanization" within a historical context, baseball has long been an arena of ethnoracial identity negotiations and flexible subjectivities that ebb and flow with the currents of U.S. ethnoracial history. As a central feature of what is imagined as "American" culture, "The baseball diamond therefore evolved into more than an athletic arena, it also became a cultural battleground where players and spectators waged discursive battles about citizenship, respectability, and

racial equality" (Burgos 2005: 5). What this means is that ballplayers, of all backgrounds and heritages, have had to position themselves within discourses of American nationality throughout baseball's history.

One might say that the move from Alex Rodriguez to "A-Rod" marks the way that this particular ballplayer navigated those nationalist discourses to further his career. Trading on these discourses, ones that privilege American identification within baseball as an institution, Rodriguez has continually re-enforced the "American" over the "Dominican." But even in doing that, Rodriguez has been unable to secure mainstream support as he is seen as fundamentally unable to uphold the American values that frame the sport in U.S. culture. In the American popular imagination baseball heralds certain "American" values: "individual responsibility to the larger community (teamwork), hard work (performing at your best), and collaborating for the greater good (winning as a team versus individual achievements)" (Burgos 2005: 2-3). These are values that "A-Rod" seems to flaunt with his active ego, womanizing behavior, and "selfish" use of performance enhancing drugs.

At the same time Dominicans in the U.S. are questioning his ethnic authenticity, mainstream U.S. media has made him the face of the most recent industry performance enhancing drugs (PED) scandal. As "America's pastime," baseball holds an almost sacred position within U.S. culture where "As a trope…baseball connotes a kinder, innocent past, where heroes could always redeem themselves and, by extension, the American dream" (Burgos 1997: 67). Rodriguez's

series of PED accusations have left a stain on the "pure" and "All-American" sport. Rodriguez has become the unwitting poster boy for failing to uphold the values the U.S. inserts within the sport. His self-accolades, high profile romantic flings, and, finally, his sordid abuse of PEDs have made him an easy target for U.S. media and baseball fans. While as Nelson Santana (2013) argues, "part of this steroids bias stems from this irrational hatred towards Rodriguez," PED usage in baseball is more systemic than is discussed, the institution itself has created a culture of use and then scapegoats the individual players who they virtually set up for such a fall (flowtv.org). As transnational figures, it has been easy for organized baseball to spin rampant PED usage as the result of easy access to the drugs in the Caribbean and Latin America in comparison to their strict regulation in the U.S. Santana sees this phenomenon reaching further than just Rodriguez, suggesting that "in the 21st century Dominicans in baseball have become this era's Salem witches—the scapegoats of the steroid era, with Alex Rodriguez serving as the principle scapegoat" (flowtv.org). Whether it is because of his use of PEDs or his "Americanized" re-branding, baseball fans in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic alike see his legacy as a tainted one.

"A-Rod is Not the Yankee Type"

While his abilities on the field have received wide coverage, it is often Rodriguez's personal life and more recent career scandals that are discussed in the popular press. Oscillating between

hero and villain status, “A-Rod” has dated media celebrities like Madonna, Kate Hudson, and Cameron Diaz and has become a central figure in both sports news forums as well as tabloid and celebrity gossip outlets. A recent Cbssports.com column summed up his mediated image well when it suggested that “the indescribably talented 18-year-old kid who came out of Miami will henceforth be known now as the spoiled would-be all-time baseball great who felt the need to cheat the system to become better than the best. He was befallen to a rare combination of selfishness, ego and greed” (January 11, 2014). Unfortunately for Rodriguez, baseball fans’ contempt for him did not begin with the most recent PED scandal; he has been fielding (no pun intended) criticism on multiple fronts. One would just have to look at the numerous A-Rod jokes that appear on the site jokes4us.com, as on others like it, to see how his public image has become the source of many a punchline. Here are some of my favorites:

> Q: What is an A-Roid cocktail?
> A: An overpriced drink that is best before October!
>
> Q: Why did Alex Rodriguez's wife file for divorce?
> A: Because she claims Alex abandoned her and she deserves to be treated better than the Yankees in October!
>
> Q: Why did A-Rod feel the need to take steroids?
> A: Every day he woke up feeling half-ass and he wanted to be ass-whole!
>
> Q: Why does Madonna and Alex Rodriguez make a good couple?
> A: They go well together since he hit 50 the same year she did!

Levity aside, these jokes are rooted in Rodriguez’s perceived failure to uphold the core values of baseball and the nationalist

discourses that inform expectations of baseball players. They lampoon Rodriguez on two fronts: his abilities as a ballplayer and his personal life.

There is no doubt that Rodriguez is one of most discussed sports stars in the U.S. popular press. And similar to the case of Zoe Saldana, online discussion threads reveal the kinds of sentiment and contestations within his star image. It is the rhetoric of "A-Rod" bashing and general dislike of the third baseman that seems to keep him in the center of media attention. A couple years ago, Realclearsports.com commented that "while Alex Rodriguez may be one of the greatest baseball players to ever play the game, he is also one of the least liked people in sports" (May 17, 2013). Furthermore, many of the online baseball fans posting in anti-A-Rod discussion threads are not mere Yankees haters, they are Yankees fans who have developed a strong distaste for Rodriguez as part of their beloved team. After surveying the types of comments that appear online I am led to wonder: Is there anyone who supports Alex Rodriguez? Well, not according to the *New York Times*, which in 2010 wrote that his peers have expressed that "Alex Rodriguez is a hypocrite and a 'prima donna.' He is not the 'Yankee type,' either, and he has 'monopolized all the attention' since arriving in the Bronx in 2004. Others have described his on-field conduct as 'bush league,' 'a little cheap,' an 'unsportsmanlike act of cheating' and more typical of 'junior high school baseball.' Tough crowd" (nytimes.com, April 23, 2010). Of this litany of complaints, what stands out to me the most is the accusation that Rodriguez is not "the Yankee type." More than just one of the many teams that

collectively make up "America's sport," the Yankees are often understood as "America's Team." From the iconic pinstripes to the roster of hall-of-famers, the New York Yankees are popularly imagined as epitomizing the "American Dream" through baseball. The pristine representation of the Yankees, not to mention the semiotic relationship between the term "Yankee" and notions of whiteness, make Rodriguez's behavior both on and off the field seem like a violation of the sanctity of baseball.

Failure on Both Ends of the Hyphen: Neither American nor Dominican Enough

Clearly, Rodriguez is not the ideal Yankee. And with such a paucity of support among baseball fans, one would think that the U.S. Dominican community would have his back. However, the Dominican community is just as, if not more so, critical of Rodriguez's persona. On the Dominican-American cultural website Esendom.com (one of the three websites I examine in Chapter 3), it was suggested that "for example, when a group of Dominicans carryon a conversation among themselves with Rodriguez as the protagonist, phrases such as 'disgusting traitor' are integrated into the conversation. Words of hate and ignorant statements spew out of the mouths of such individuals. The root of this ignorant way of thinking is simply envy" (August 4, 2010). While this is a reasonable assumption, jealousy alone does not account for the frequent claims among Dominicans that Rodriguez is a "traitor." Looking back to the start of his career with the Seattle Mariners, the *Seattle Times* published a quote from Rodriguez—before he

became A-Rod—that hinted at his ambivalent and conflicted relationship with his Dominican heritage:

> "People used to ask me if I was Dominican and I'd say, `Yeah.' But I had no idea what I was saying," Rodriguez said last week in a quiet moment before his team was to play the LaRomana Asucareros [of the Dominican Baseball League]. "Coming here meant more than working on hitting a curve or the backhand play in the hole. I came to find out where I'm from" (as quoted in seattletimes.com, December 14, 1994).

After his return to the States following his stint playing Dominican baseball, Rodriguez made numerous comments mentioning his discomfort living in the Dominican Republic and feeling like an outsider there. While this is an experience that is commonly shared among U.S.-born Dominicans who return to the Dominican Republic, most Dominicans who live in the U.S. take their return visits/stays as an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural heritage. Many see Rodriguez's dislike of being on the island as him squandering the opportunity to explore his cultural roots and, therefore, making him a cultural "traitor." Clearly some Dominicans in the U.S. share Esendom.com's position that "major League Baseball has never had a baseball player with the talent of Alex Rodriguez. Rather than judging him over every minor thing he does, Dominicans should celebrate the storied career of this prolific Dominican athlete" (August 4, 2010). Yet others reject what they see as blind identity politics, refusing to support someone whose parents might have been born in the same country as their own, as they believe Rodriguez has shed his Dominican self in favor of U.S. success.

As an example of the rhetoric that surrounds Rodriguez's star image, a discussion appearing at the end of a 2011 Diva-dirt.com piece on his relationship with WWE star Torrie Wilson ran the gambit of the spectrum of audience interpretations of Rodriguez's star text. Some of the comments are very similar to the ones I have already mentioned here: "As a Yankees fan I have to ask...WHY A-ROD WHY?!?!? Stop dating and get ready for spring training so the Yanks can win their 28th World Series"; "I thought A-Rod's job was to end the Yankees season by striking out, like he has the last two years :)"; "I have a pretty major loathing for A-Hole, um, I mean A-Rod," and "Eww, A-Rod is gross. He looks like The Situation." One exchange between two participants, one of whom was not familiar with "A-Rod," covered his "ladies' man" image, with a post that asked "I don't keep up with baseball at all so can anyone tell me what did the guy do to be considered a douche?" Another poster informed them that "He cheated on his then wife with a couple of women and Madonna." If the discussion had ended there, this particular thread would have not stood out among the many that I surveyed. However, this particular discussion thread made a direct reference to his Dominican heritage as well as the Dominican-ness of two of the discussion participants. The first of these comments reflects a simple recognition of Rodriguez's Dominican heritage, saying "I don't like A-Rod even though we're both Dominicans, lol. Torrie is to [sic] good for him but if she's happy, I'm happy." However, it is the second comment that not only reinforces my claim that the U.S. Dominican community believe he has distanced himself from them but also supports

the idea that many Dominicans view this move as a betrayal: “I'm Dominican as well, and I'm not big fan of A-Rod either ever since that controversy where it looked like he denied being Dominican.” Rodriguez is seen as failing on multiple fronts; he is a failure at being Dominican enough, being a good enough baseball player, and sustaining the expectations of the sports hero.

DOMINICAN MUSIC STARS: A MORE AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION OF *DOMINICANIDAD*?

It may seem that media figures of Dominican heritage are being criticized on all fronts, and that is not entirely incorrect. Success in the U.S. often facilitates, if not demands, a degree of assimilation into dominant norms—norms defined by notions of whiteness and middle-class status. Those marked by ethnicity in the public eye must simultaneously conform to perceived U.S. norms while perpetually being excluded from whiteness (Negra 2001). Similarly, by making concessions to U.S. normativity, media figures are seen as overly “Americanized” to “authentically” represent their ethnic communities. Stuck in representational limbo, these celebrities are no longer seen as a true representation of the communities from which they came while never being able to fully assimilate into dominant white society. After examining the star texts of both Zoe Saldana and Alex Rodriguez I am left with what might seem like an obvious question: is there a scenario in which a person of Dominican heritage in mainstream culture might obtain the approval of the Dominican community in the U.S.?

However, this type of no-win framing is not reflective of how texts are negotiated. It is far more nuanced and complicated than merely assuming that one must fit into one or the other category, "American" or "Dominican." Even though we often think in binaries, that does not mean we are unable to think outside that paradigm. Elements such as hybridity and "cross-over" success can allow for the cultural retention and respect for heritage that is demanded from the ethnic community while still allowing for mainstream and commercial acclaim in U.S. culture. As exemplified by the cases of Zoe Saldana and Alex Rodriguez, this is a difficult situation to maneuver, and many, if not most, fail. Alternatively, those I interviewed suggested that those figures of Dominican heritage that are navigating mainstream success and Dominican authenticity the most successfully are those who are in the creative fields of music and literature as well as many recently emerging Dominican politicians and advocates. These are, for those who participated in my fieldwork study, the people who have been best able to achieve mainstream success while maintaining respect and visibility for their Dominican roots. It is easier for Dominicans in the U.S. to relate to these celebrities than the others who might have become superstars in U.S. media yet have been unable to sustain an unproblematic image of *dominicanidad*.

Carmen told me that "there are a lot more representations of Dominicans in music, in general. And, in particular, rap songs mention Dominicans a lot. Generally in terms of them being there, part of the environment." Whether it is Jay-Z discussing his "Dominican homeboys" in NYC, or

Dominicans singing about the streets of Washington Heights, the Dominican presence in the music industry is much more visible and diversified than in other types of media. Furthermore, these musical representations of Dominicans and *dominicanidad* are received more favorably by those I interviewed. Moreover, many feel like Dominican musicians do a better job of representing them and conveying the Dominican experience in the U.S. For one college student I spoke with, it is through their music that he would like to introduce Dominicans and their culture to mainstream U.S. Junior[29] told me "more people just need to be informed about Dominicans. I would introduce Dominicans to mainstream U.S. through music first, like bachata and Romeo, more mainstream crossover music like Aventura. They represent Dominican-American identity to me." It is easier for Dominicans in the U.S. to relate to these celebrities than the others who might have become superstars in U.S. media yet have been unable to sustain an unproblematic image of *dominicanidad*.

Helpful here is Gustavo Pérez Firmat's (1994) scholarship on Cuban-American identity and the role of the "hyphen" within the development of Cuban culture in the U.S. While the Cuban experience in the U.S. is different from the Dominican—unlike for Cuba, Dominicans are able to more or less move back and forth from the Dominican Republic as they please and are able to communicate with those left behind—Pérez Firmat's analysis concerning hyphenated identity does help elucidate the functions of authenticity diasporically. Particularly salient in the Dominican context is his notion of

[29] Interview conducted on June 7, 2013 with U.S.-born man in his late twenties.

an “elastic” culture where “A sane biculturalism may consist in alternating cultures, rather than in trying to fuse them” (Pérez Firmat 1994: 125). As Dominicans in the U.S., the people I interviewed maintained a complex relationship with the “Dominican-American” subjectivity (as will be further explored in the Conclusion chapter). To be both “Dominican” and “American” at the same time provokes a reality where “Instead of being assigned separate roles, the two cultures rub together, creating friction” (Pérez Firmat 1994: 130). But these are productive frictions, frictions that become internalized, negotiated, and translated into what the Dominican-American experience is and the culture it fosters. Ultimately, those stars of Dominican heritage that can straddle the hyphen—those that are able to move fluidly from one side to the other—have been more successful at sustaining a shared sense of *dominicanidad* with Dominicans in the U.S. (and often in the Dominican Republic). Furthermore, they are able to approach their experience of hyphenated identity as Pérez Firmat suggests, where “the hyphen is not a minus sign but a plus” (16).

According to those I spoke with in NYC and my internet reception research, the most popular, successful, and discussed Dominican musical artists are the bachata/R&B/pop singer Prince Royce (Geoffrey Royce Rojas) and the bachata-R&B/hip-hop hybrid group Aventura (consisting of Anthony "Romeo" Santos, Henry Santos, Lenny Santos, and Max Santos). According to Diego[30], “Aventura paved the way” for Prince Royce to become “the voice of this generation of Dominican-Americans.” In light of

[30] Interview conducted on July 11, 2013 with DR-born but U.S. raised man in his late twenties.

Prince Royce and Aventura's abilities to seemingly shoulder the burden of representation among Dominicans in the U.S. in a way that most feel is "authentic" to *dominicanidad* while also serving as models for success in this country, I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of each.

In 2010 *Billboard* published a piece on Aventura and their success among Dominicans, Spanish-language music fans, and mainstream U.S. They wrote:

> [By] infusing its music with an urban sensibility-both visual and aural-Aventura connected not only with the music's hardcore fans, but also with a new generation of listeners that identified with the group's bilingual, bicultural makeup. This would prove to be a crucial factor in the act's continued expansion as it became attractive to both mainstream Latin media and mainstream media overall (billboard.com, April 26, 2010).

The group's main musical genre, bachata, like much of Caribbean music, has historically lacked popularity in the U.S. among Spanish speakers and non-Spanish speakers alike. However, the group's hybrid sound and style—what *Billboard* problematically refers to as its "bi-cultural makeup"—made them a stand out in the industry. While bachata, merengue, and salsa are very popular among Dominicans and other Latino Caribbeans in the U.S., Caribbean music has really only had a sustained following in this niche market, most frequently among the older generation and newly immigrated. Aventura, by mixing bachata with styles popular in U.S. "urban" music, has carved out a larger audience and fan base. Formed by the sons of Dominican immigrants, the group exemplifies the hyphenated reality of Dominicans living in the U.S. while appealing simultaneously to a more mainstream market.

A 2011 National Public Radio (NPR) piece that interviewed member Romeo Santos pointed to what makes Aventura not only successful as musicians but also able to speak to Dominicans in the U.S. who have felt their mediated exclusion from U.S. culture. In the piece Santos tells NPR:

> When we started Aventura, I think a lot of — the reason why we became so successful besides, you know, doing good music, was also the fact that it was unique and different and never done," he says. "So this is what I compare this to: I've never seen something like this done before. And when I see movies and Dominican characters, they're not really Dominicans! I know what Dominicans sound like. I know their accent, I know their words, and they never get it. And now we have the opportunity to do it, and do it right (npr.org, November 18, 2011).

It appears that the members of Aventura are all too familiar with the desires of the U.S. Dominican community to see themselves depicted and represented in a way that they could identify with. NPR, calling member Romeo Santos "the hottest artist on the Latin charts right now," spoke highly of Aventura, writing: "Aventura has sold 4 million records in the U.S. and sold out Madison Square Garden in New York several times. He may not be a household name among non-Hispanics yet, but Santos is determined to change that. His debut solo album, Formula Volume 1, aims to cross over into the English-language market and spread his brand of bachata to the masses" (npr.org, November 18, 2011). This self-identified Dominican-American group has developed a large and diverse fan base and has achieved a level of cross-over mainstream success that few others have.

This piece sparked a telling discussion on npr.org, a mainstream and reputable media source, where posters were not only actively discussing the band and the way the piece covered the Dominican musicians but were also engaged in discourses of *dominicanidad*. Moreover, the posts were in both Spanish and English, which was the only

example I found of this on an English only website. One poster demonstrated their support, saying:

> *Felicidades por maestro Romeo!...y felicidades por la gente de la isla, su cultura riquisima, sus vibras buenas. Descubre la musica bachata hace dos a˜õs en un pizzaria en Nuevo York(los dueños era Griegos y Francaises, figate!). Desde el primer momento: guau!!!" Vivo en EEUU y Mexico y siempre tengo mi musica bachatisima conmigo! Animo bachata!* (npr.org, November 18, 2011).
>
> Congratulations maestro Romeo!...congratulations to the people of the island, its rich culture, its good vibes. I discovered bachata music two years ago in a pizzeria in New York (the owners were Greek and French, I tell you!) From the first moment: wow! I live in the U.S. and Mexico and I always have my bachata music with me. Hooray bachata!) (npr.org, November 18, 2011). [31]

This particular participant does not identify as Dominican in the post, but, choosing to comment in Spanish does reveal a level of cultural solidarity that is both political and visual. It marks the members of Aventura as having a level of cultural authenticity. Another form of cultural recognition came from one participant who is clearly a bachata fan: "Like a musicologist, Romeo seems to be preserving their natural voices for history. JLG, Aventura, Joan Soriano, el Mayimbe, Romeo and many others represent artists on a continuum named Bachata that's slowly been gaining recognition in mainstream circles. Let's respect their hard-won uniqueness" (npr.org, November 18, 2011). Many others shared their admiration for the group and identified themselves as fans.

However, among the praise came criticism reminiscent of that received by the other celebrities of Dominican heritage discussed in this chapter. One poster complained: "I really think the popularity of Santos right now is merely due to the similarity between his rhythm tracks and a lot of Mexican pop styles that have been around for a long time. That, and also

[31] My translation from the original Spanish

the gimmicky new dance they've come up for it for the people in clubs who can't dance salsa" (npr.org, November 18, 2011). Another saying "This report forgot to mention the artist who truly crossover the 'bachata' genre before Romero Santos, even if it was more of a pop version of this musical style. This artist is Juan Luis Guerra whose album 'Bachata Rosa'…was a huge hit all over the world in 1990!" (npr.org, November 18, 2011). These comments have a similar feel to the disavowel seen for those celebrities that are viewed as poorly representing their Dominican roots. One could easily chuck this discontent up to the adage that "you can't please everybody." However, I argue that the negative comments are a reflection of just how tenuous and difficult it is to manage the burden of representing *dominicanidad*.

Prince Royce, however, received much less criticism in online discussions and is in many ways the darling of the industry—and latina.com. Born May 11, 1989, in the U.S. to Dominican parents, Royce epitomizes the hybrid experience of Dominicans in the U.S. A native to the South Bronx, he has said "I can't tell you if I'm Latino or if I'm American. I'm both. I speak Spanish just as much as I speak English and I write English just as much as I write Spanish" (as quoted in the *Miami Herald*, October 11, 2013). Breaking into the Latin pop mainstream in 2010 with his bilingual cover of "Stand by Me," he has released 3 albums and is slated to release his first all English-language album in 2015 along with his fourth Spanish-language album. Epitomizing a life lived on the hyphen, Royce has made a name for himself and continues to receive acclaim from Dominicans and non-Dominicans alike.

He has a strong presence in Spanish-language media, mostly thanks to his role as a coach on the Spanish-language version of *The Voice*. Royce has also gained mainstream

success, even performing a duet with one of the finalists on *The X-Factor*. Writing about that performance, latina.com posted: "The Dominican superstar teamed up with Olivero in one of his final performances on the show Wednesday night. The final three contestants -- Olivero, Alex & Sierra, and Jeff Gutt -- all performed duets with pop stars in their genre. For Olivero, it seemed like an obvious choice to team up with Prince Royce, the bachatero he's often compared to" (December 19, 2013). Royce's voice and musical style has found a way to speak to the millions of Dominicans living in the U.S. in ways that have alluded most others. According to him, his "music has attracted a lot of kids like [him], born and raised in the United States, who still enjoy their Latin roots" (as quoted in the *Miami Herald*, October 11, 2013). The ability to speak to those Dominicans in the U.S. who are all too aware of their exclusion from popular awareness and representation proves how he has been able to navigate in an environment that has proven more than inhospitable to other notable Dominican public figures.

Much like Aventura who came before him, Royce's music is a hybrid of Dominican bachata and U.S. genres of hip-hop, funk, and R&B. He has said of his music "It's very funky, going back to James Brown and Earth Wind and Fire with bachata. I definitely got creative while still keeping it commercial and down to the roots I really love" (as quoted in the *Miami Herald*, October 11, 2013). His particular brand of musical fusion has made him a break out star both in the Spanish-language and mainstream music industries. At 25, he has already won a plethora of awards[32] and has performed with the likes of Enrique Iglesias and

[32] Royce has received 16 Billboard Latin Music Awards, 13 *Premio Lo Nuestro*s, 17 Youth Awards, 3 Latin Grammy nominations, silver and gold torches at the Festival of Viña del Mar, Billboard's composer of the year, and at the age of 22 he became the youngest recipient of BMI's Latin Songwriter of the year (prnewswire.com,

Pitbull and has recorded collaborations with Mana, Daddy Yankee, Selena Gomez, and Thalia. He has had multiple U.S. and Latin American tours, and has sold out venues like Radio City Music Hall in New York and the Nokia Theater in Los Angeles.

Yet Royce's most distinctive quality is his relatability to fans who believe they have not only a shared sense of *dominicanidad* but a shared sense of the U.S. Dominican experience. One fan told the *Miami Herald* she "feels a connection with Royce and pride at his success. His parents are Dominican, he's from New York — it's my story. I had a customer the other day who said, 'Where are you from?' and I said, 'Dominican Republic,' and he said, 'Oh, like Prince Royce'" (miamiherald.com, October 11, 2013). Like so many other young Dominicans born in the U.S., Royce spent summers in the Dominican Republic and felt the intense desire to connect with his cultural roots, yet, never quite felt like a "true" Dominican. In the same *Miami Herald* article, Royce discusses his time in the Dominican Republic:

> "It was poor but not that bad — we had electricity, we had furniture," Royce says. "Instead of hip-hop, he heard bachata," which has grown from a raw, rollicking country music to a more melodic, romantic style that has usurped merengue as the D.R.'s dominant music genre. "Those are the songs that really make me think of the Dominican Republic," he says. "Enjoying the natural things — the water, the beach, looking at trees. Getting bit by mosquitoes" (miamiherald.com, October 11, 2013).

Like many Dominicans in the U.S. who were born here but still feel highly connected to the island culture, Royce prioritizes balancing the two cultures in the hybrid and hyphenated fashion that so many explained to me during my interviews.

December 19, 2013).

It could also very well be that the nature of music celebrity operates differently from other types of celebrities. Musical expression has the ability to induce a certain affected emotionality among audiences and can reach people through different avenues than other types of media. Mark Duffett (2009), speaking of the power of live musical performance, contends that "the market economy supporting popular music facilitates and realizes something much broader and less tangible than itself: a 'symbolic economy' of cultural power in which stars manage the emotions of their audience" (41). Yet, I would suggest that the success of this newest generation of Dominican stars, those who are part of the generation of Prince Royce, are more invested in sustaining their hyphenated identity when negotiating their trajectory through the celebrity machine. Whether it is because musical stars like Aventura or Prince Royce feel less pressure to "Americanize," have less ambitious goals to make it big in the U.S. mainstream, or insist on making it on their own (Dominican) terms, they have managed to accomplish something most have not: maintaining the respect of the U.S. Dominican community while sparking off the integration of Dominicans into U.S. mainstream culture.

Chapter Two: MTV's *Washington Heights* and Televisual *dominicanidad*

"You are not showing the real Washington Heights. What is this community? This is just 6 people who could be anyone. What, just because they are Dominican it is representative of the Heights? This show had no legitimacy. Not really of the Heights, about the Heights. This is not representative of my community and I do not want it to be representative of my community."[33]

By the time this interviewee shared with me her opinion of MTV's reality TV show *Washington Heights* (2013), I had already heard similar sentiments from most of the Dominicans/Dominican-Americans I had interviewed. As my interviews were conducted soon after the season finale and before it was officially canceled by MTV for low ratings, the network's new take on their tried and true reality TV formula was fresh on the minds of Dominicans living in New York City. After establishing itself as an industrial leader in teenage and early adult reality television, starting in 1992 with *The Real World*, MTV seems to have found more success with its reality TV series than its original content platform of music videos. The network has become ever more adept at creating reality programs that are both popular among audiences and make significant impacts within U.S. popular culture. MTV has formulated a certain reality brand, one that produces shows that follow certain industrial conventions and adhere to a handful of narrative and production styles that can be recognized in each new series it airs. While each new iteration of this MTV reality brand is not necessarily identical to the next, certainly elements emerge when

[33] From interview with Dania

considering its series as a canon. Therefore, for MTV, *Washington Heights* is merely an example of exploiting an established formula with a new set of players. The Dominicans of Washington Heights, NY are merely a substitution in a well-perfected recipe that turned out to be a bad batch for the network. *However*, for Dominicans in the U.S., this is hardly just another re-working of a proven MTV reality formula that happened to not pan out. For those who would align themselves with the cast of this show, Dominicans living in the U.S., much more was at stake than ratings.

Drawing from interviews and online reception data, in this chapter I analyze the reception to MTV's *Washington Heights* as not only the first mainstream Dominican-centric media text but also as an inroad to active negotiations concerning the nature of *dominicanidad*. Both beholden to the constructed MTV brand and the functions of reality television more broadly, *Washington Heights* is positioned within a complicated vector of identification. Like many of the shows in MTV's reality oeuvre, *Washington Heights* follows the lives of a group of early twenty-somethings who are more or less friends. The show depicts various segments of each cast member's life, including romantic tensions and "hookups," legal troubles, familial relationships, social gatherings, and the drama of everyday life—all against the backdrop of New York City (NYC). What makes *Washington Heights* stand out from other similar reality shows is that its cast is made up almost exclusively of self-identified Dominican-Americans, with only one member of non-Dominican heritage. Like *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012) and *Buckwild* (2013) before it, *Washington Heights* capitalizes on the cast's marked cultural difference to construct a narrative of Otherness through ethnoracial spectacle. Audiences are, quite purposefully,

meant to interpret the cast and series' narrative within a framework of the ways in which MTV defines Dominican-ness. However, as the show was canceled after only one season, Dominican-ness turned out to not be a compelling enough ethnoracial spectacle to sustain the number of viewers that MTV would consider adequate to grant the show a second season.

Furthermore, reality TV is unscripted, or at least it claims to be. As such, what is represented in reality TV is taken by many as a more "true" or unfiltered reflection of those on our television screens. Put another way, shows categorized as "reality" do not have the safety net of a non-real constructed script. A script implies an authorial intervention, a pre-meditated narrative, a representation of the not-real—even if it is similar, or nearly identical, to the real world audiences inhabit. Authenticity, subsequently, becomes central to how an audience interprets reality TV narratives, characters/figures, and representations. For Dominicans in the U.S., the fact that *Washington Heights* is a reality series makes their scrutiny of the show's representations of *dominicanidad* more critical and their expectations higher. This chapter addresses the question: what types of discourses appear in the reception of MTV's *Washington Heights* among Dominicans living in NYC and how did they interpret the show's attempt at televisual *dominicanidad*? Furthermore, what industrial constraints framed the show as produced and how might we understand the program in relation to the broader MTV reality television canon?

This chapter looks at *Washington Heights* as part of MTV reality branding more broadly, and endeavors to answer Amanda Ann Klein's (2013) call to critically examine MTV programming when she writes:

> So a poetics of MTV is, simply, an engagement with American identities as they [are] constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed…It is our challenge to watch these programs and parse through the identity politics they present…MTV is doing what it has always done—it is filling a gap, in this case, our desire to figure out what identity means in a society that really wants to believe it is post-identity (judgmentalobserver.com).

Bridging the literature on reality television (Andrejevic 2002; Holmes & Jermyn 2004; Kraszewski 2010; Ouellette 2010; Curnutt 2013; Klein 2013) with the work being done by popular cultural critics and contextualizing both through an examination of my interviews and critical and textual analyses of the show, I argue that *Washington Heights* was unable to find a large audience because it was only able to resonate with U.S.-born Dominicans in their teens and early twenties. While no doubt this meets the demographic MTV is targeting, the show was unpopular among the larger demographic of which Dominican-Americans make up only a very small percentage. Furthermore, the show was a disappointment to the Dominican community within the U.S. as the way that it constructed *dominicanidad* televisually and discursively was diluted to the extent that it was unrecognizable to Dominicans/Dominican-Americans and failed to adequately represent their culture. MTV's primary audience was not compelled by the lifestyle show of working-class Dominican-Americans, Dominican-Americans resented the exclusion of cultural markers and Spanish, and most audiences (regardless of ethnic affiliation) found it hard to identify with *Washington Heights*' cast.

REALITY TELEVISION

Reality TV has become a catch-all industrial and popular term that includes almost any media program that is seen as having figures who are portraying themselves. In other words, unlike scripted narrative series, reality TV does not employ actors portraying fictionalized characters in constructed narrative environments. Yet as Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004) demonstrate in the introduction to their anthology on reality TV, *Understanding Reality Television*, defining "reality TV" is a difficult task, one that never seems to accommodate all the programs that are commonly included within the label as an industrial category. For them it boils down to, "Ultimately, and importantly, it is perhaps only possible to suggest that what unites the range of programming conceivably described as 'Reality TV' is primarily discursive, visual and technological *claim* to 'the real'" (Holmes & Jermyn 2004: 5). Still, like with documentary, the "reality" in reality TV must be produced, edited, formed, and constructed into a presentable text. Claims of "scripted-ness" and collusion within reality series are not only common but part-in-parcel with the viewing of these programs. From producers, to participants, to audiences, the extent to which a reality series is "real" is not only acknowledged and debated, but it is also done so in a highly self-conscious manner. Reality show participants complain about how they have been edited unfairly, casting directors discuss that they are searching for certain types to construct entertaining and dynamic casts, and audiences frequently speculate as to which reality figures are the most "real" and which ones are the most "fake."

Moreover, while reality programming is nothing new to the televisual landscape, these programs have come into a renaissance of sorts. The proliferation of this type of programming is not only substantiated by impressive ratings figures, it is also cost effective for networks who would rather recycle proven and cheaply produced reality programming than risk the financial flop of a narrative series. There is a clear industrial infatuation with reality TV, and in the intense competition garnered in a multi-platform, multi-network, multi-media world, "the accelerated importance of the [reality TV] format is clearly also shaped by the 'risk-adverse' broadcast environment—the desire to minimise risk in the face of increasing competition" (Holmes & Jermyn 2004: 14). Therefore it has become common industrial logic that reality programming involves relatively low financial risk but has the potential to produce a large pay-off.

While seen as industrially lucrative, reality series are often associated with cultural deficit. Television, in and of itself, has historically been understood as a low-brow medium, and reality TV even more so. Programs such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC, 2012-2014) and the *Real Housewives* franchise (Bravo, 2006-present) might be widely popular, but they are also given the moniker of "trash TV." Moreover, these program formats are mimicked, replicated, and re-worked within cross-network and globalized media terrains. Cultural critic Benjamin Wallace (2013) discusses this type of recycling and hyper-saturation of the reality TV form, assessing that:

> If reality TV is an extractive industry, relentlessly depleting our cultural patrimony (geographic character, obscure vocations, piquant subcultures, sui generis personalities, human beings who don't conceive of themselves as corporate brands) for our amusement, it long ago exhausted the surface-mineable goods. Thus the

> endless recycling of tropes (grab bag of sub-functional dead-enders thrown together in a McMansion, etc.), cast members (via spinoff shows, all-star shows), and people (Omarosa Manigault has appeared, by her count, on more than 30 different reality shows) (vulture.com).

Critics and audiences bemoan the re-hashing of formulaic programs that glorify "normal" people, often behaving in ways we deem as deplorable, negative, desperate, and exploitative. Yet audiences are still flocking to watch these, mostly, everyday people in often unextraordinary circumstances.

In his examination of the show that is often heralded as the originator of contemporary reality TV, *The Real World* (MTV, 1992-present), Mark Andrejevic (2002) suggests that what makes reality programming a distinct genre is "the fact that [the programs] are not based on the documentation of exceptional moments, but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life. This rhythm may take place in a contrived context, but the distinguishing element…is that the surveillance of the characters is, for the period they are on the show, comprehensive" (259-260). Put another way, it is not that reality show participants are inherently more real than other television personalities, it is that they do not have the ability to escape from the camera's watchful eye. For instance, Ellen Degeneres is a real person who hosts a show that is not interpreted as fictionalized, yet as she is not under constant camera surveillance—even acknowledging her high degree of media exposure through cross-platform appearances and paparazzi attention—the moments audiences see her are not part of a 24/7 continuous video documentation. We see only the Ellen that is framed, contextualized, and constituted through the parameters she chooses—and in those occasional instances when the paparazzi chooses. Conversely,

reality show participants are understood as those who have deconstructed the barriers between their individual public and private spheres, where "such programs help to define a particular form of subjectivity consonant with an emerging online economy: one which equates submission to comprehensive surveillance with self-expression and self-knowledge" (Andrejevic 2002: 253). In the very consent to continuous filming of their lives, reality participants are constituted as more authentic, honest, and subsequently "real" when compared to those who do not submit to constant surveillance. For Andrejevic, "the promise of the real in reality TV [is] that surveillance provides a certain guarantee of authenticity, and that this authenticity becomes a process of self-expression, self-realization and self-validation" (265). Audiences are savvy enough to know that it is impossible to fully represent these figures and often bemoan the contrived nature of reality programming. However, as Hugh Curnutt (2013) explains, "reality TV's use of participants acts as a kind of postmodern lure for a particular viewing perspective by giving something eerily authentic for the eye to seize upon while, in a simultaneous conceit, inviting speculation about the (in)authenticity of the genre's depictions" (296). Essentially, those who participate in reality programs are seen as more real than actors and other TV personalities, but less real than the people audiences know in their own lives. In other words, they are as real as the medium of television allows.

MTV, Reality TV, and the Spectacle of Otherness

As a principle network on the cable channel lineup, MTV has always been credited with innovative programming and re-defining what is understood as television. First hitting

the airwaves in the early 1980s, MTV has been the channel of Generation X and Millennials. Even after abandoning the network's original format—music videos and other music-centric programming—MTV remains an important cultural broker in the U.S. Regardless of the network's shifts in programming, processes of re-branding, and attempts to stay relevant as new generations demand evolving types of media engagement, MTV has proven that "As time passed what had once been the pre-eminent medium for the broadcast of music videos became the pre-eminent medium for reality TV" (Jones 2005: 86). Kicking off the network's foray into reality programming, MTV premiered *The Real World* in 1992 followed by a version of this format taken to the road in *Road Rules* (1995-2007). As the signatures of the MTV reality canon, these series have defined the MTV brand over the years and set the mold for most of the reality programs the networked developed. It was not until *Laguna Beach* (2004-2006) did the network's reality production style expand to include more cinematic and highly stylized aesthetics. These two stylistic veins, one rooted in *The Real World* and the other in *Laguna Beach*, have sustained the production of MTV's reality brand that trades on youth culture, vicarious lifestyles, and spectacles that depend on the casting of "normal" people placed in situations and environments that are connoted as societally, culturally, and/or unnaturally "abnormal."

MTV Reality Branding

As Curnutt (2013) suggests, "reality TV, like all genres, is…the product of a specific set of discursive practices that connects its different texts and audiences around common themes" (296). As such, it is susceptible to commodification and replication through the

practices of branding. When examining MTV specifically, the network has gone through several stages of re-branding over their 33-year history. From a programming schedule consisting of entirely music videos (yet only those that were considered rock and were heavily white-centric), to exploiting the hip-hop generation, to the reduction of music-based programming for a wide range of youth-oriented programming, to the reality TV juggernaut it is today, each decade marked for MTV a rehabilitation and re-branding of its core programming. While the 1990s saw the MTV reality brand exemplified by *The Real World*, *Road Rules*, and their various challenge and reunion spinoffs, the 2000s ushered in new shows with new themes operating within evolving political logics. With changes in branding came shifts in programming themes and the ways in which MTV engaged with cultural discourses.

Political trends and discourses have always played a large role in MTV branding, as the network sought to be the voice of initially Generation X and, now, Millennials. Reality TV scholar Laurie Ouellette (2010) argues that no matter how staged, reality TV is key to constituting powerful social truths. Regardless of how criticized and denigrated, reality programming reflects cultural trends and audience media tastes. Therefore these programs should not be merely disregarded as "trash TV" but instead should face the same rigorous critical analysis that media scholars direct towards any other type of media text. MTV, quite intentionally, became known as a network that not only engaged in politics but pushed boundaries. Implicit within the motivations of much of their reality programming is an attempt to voice and negotiate political currents that network producers considered of interest to their youthful audience.

Jon Kraszewski (2010) identifies racial politics as one of the political currents that MTV readily addressed through its reality programing. He discusses the shift between the network's realities series in the 1990s to a more neoliberal take on multiracialism. During the 1990s, MTV reality shows, primarily *The Real World* and *Road Rules*, directly engaged with racial discord and social ignorance of the realities of the lives of people of color. They specifically cast white participants who had little to no exposure to marginalized populations—not limited to racial minorities but also those who are cultural, sexual, and political minorities—to be placed within intimate setting along with representatives of those populations. In the process of the show, these previously ignorant white cast members learned about the lives of those whose subjectivity was identified as racially, ethnically, or sexually different from their own. Through learning about their lives and seeing them as individual people whom they come to like—or at the very least tolerate—these representatives of marginalized groups also instructed the audience about tolerance and acceptance. Most frequently this played out through the pairing of white rural or Southern cast members with Black urban women and men, where "Representations of blacks and whites conquering racism on 1990s seasons of *The Real World* helped MTV create its liberal, pro-African American brand" (Kraszewski 2010: 134).

However, as the country entered a period of more conservative political trends, MTV began to rebrand its reality programming in the 2000s. The election of George W. Bush was the impetus for a national turn to conservatism, and MTV followed suit by redirecting their programming away from more politically oriented content to that which was not so dependent on social commentary. In an effort to appear less liberally minded,

MTV took up neoliberal discourses of multiracialism in an attempt to "rebrand itself as being more tolerant of all political opinions in the 2000s" (Kraszewski 2010: 134). Instead of teaching audiences how to accept and appreciate the plights of marginalized people in the U.S., MTV's 2000s reality programming, specifically its flagship show *The Real World*, cast participants who were multiracial and positioned them as "liberal utopian figures who symbolized racial fluidity and harmony" (Kraszewski 2010: 135). Exploiting post-racial discourses and trading on the increasing popularity of the multiracial figure, *The Real World* was no longer teaching ignorant white cast members—and by extension the mainstream U.S.—about the realities of prejudice. Instead "In addition to offering stories of liberal utopias free of racism, multiracialism allowed *The Real World* to portray race as a project of self-management where individuals would rely upon themselves, not the government and the welfare state, to succeed in society" (Kraszewski 2010: 140). This type of reality TV representation mirrors neoliberal post-racial discourses that disavow inequality as a socially created and sustained system and, instead, project these disparities of parity on the individuals who should be able to make a successful life for themselves, and if they still cannot rise above their circumstances, then they only have themselves to blame. The ways in which social structures are still very much steeped in ethnoracial ideologies becomes obscured through the focus on the multiracial individual.

Both Kraszewski (2010) and Oullette (2010) gesture towards the most recent rebranding of the network that coincided with the election of Barak Obama, which was partly the result of unprecedented young adult political involvement. Kraszweski suggested that "Because portraits of race on *The Real World* are often attached to the way MTV

represents the political mood, one would assume that racial representations on the series will change during a time when we have a multiracial president often identified as an African American" (144-145). Certainly MTV reality programming has seemed to return to its more politically charged content. A few years ago the network "announced its intention to replace trivial reality entertainment with issue-oriented and civic-minded material" (Ouellette 2010: 69). But this could not occur by merely stepping back a decade and producing programming as if the programs they aired in the 2000s were never produced. So while MTV has been able to reignite their politically motivated fire, they have lost the battle to post-racial discourses. The newest programs coming from the network might indeed be more "issue-oriented and civic-minded," but they are unable to comment on the types of socially conditioned lived realities that they used to highlight in their programming. Instead, as it is currently branded, MTV seeks to produce shows that are issue-oriented in a way that trades on notions of difference without acknowledging the systems that set up these notions of difference or stimulating political debate in a way that would prevent each new series from appearing like a minority/marginalized flavor of the month—this month Italian-Americans, last month rural southerners, and next month urban Dominicans in NYC.

MTV and Identity Production

As part of their reality TV branding, MTV operates as a broker of televisual identity. And while it might not have been their intention, MTV has paved the way for televisual *dominicanidad* through including *Washington Heights* among their litany of reality programs. Amanda Ann Klein has taken on many MTV reality shows in her scholarship,

examining each new addition to the MTV reality canon and noting how each partakes in the network's function as a platform of mediated identity construction. For Klein (2013), Millennials, who are MTV's target audience at the present moment, are undergoing an identity struggle that is subsequently reflected in MTV's reality programming. She explains that "Now MTV is primarily known for creating original, non-musical content. Specifically, MTV likes to produces [sic] reality shows about segments of the contemporary youth demographic—the very demographic that is watching MTV" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). Not only is MTV creating programming for and about teenagers and young adults, but it is striving to create content that includes those demographics of the youth population that seldom appear on television screens—and in the process manufacturing a sense of new-ness within a genre often criticized for its repetition. Klein (2013) suggests that "Cast members of MTV's most highly rated reality shows (*Jersey Shore, Teen Mom, The Hills, The Real World*, and now *Buckwild*) willingly serve as synecdoches for their ethnic groups, their subculture, their class, their gender, their sexuality, their religion, or their region of the U.S." (judgmentalobserver.com). The participants on these shows are not only self-presenting their individual identities, but they are also serving as representatives of which ever group that particular series is exploiting.

The MTV reality format has conditioned the Millennial audience, instructing them to be hyper-self-aware and that a key part of participating in the contemporary world is being able to verbally and visually articulate thier identity. While Gen Xers are often associated with notions of passivity and laissez-faire political engagement, Millennials are imagined as a generation that takes an active role in generating and constructing their own identities

(Oake 2004). As U.S. youth become increasingly engaged with new and evolving media technologies, the presentation of self becomes second nature. Any Millennial can offer a sound bite about how they conceive of themselves or easily construct a FaceBook profile. This generation has grown up with social media, reality show confessionals, and neoliberal individualism. Suggesting that MTV has created a "new poetics of being-in-the-world," Klein contends that for Millennials "MTV is an 'identity workbook': cast members speak their differences openly, try on different identities, and pick fights in order to see how these identities play out and to what effect" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). The network's reality programming becomes a stage for participants to work through ways of expressing and performing their identities as audiences concurrently enter into a negotiation against and along those televisual identities. Essentially, "the difference between the MTV of 1981 and the MTV of today is not simply the difference between music videos and reality TV—the difference is in the way MTV conceives of youth selfhood" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). I would add to this that not only has MTV's conception of youth selfhood evolved through the years, but this evolution is directly tied to its process of re-branding. *Washington Heights*, with its cast of Dominican-American Millennials, adheres to the constraints of the MTV reality brand of the 2010s.

Regardless of the era—that is, what political currents are influencing the political discourses within its programming –MTV branding has as one of its central tenants an overt identity project. And as Klein (2013) attests to, "clear identity construction is central to the appeal of MTV's current programming" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). However, as part of this identity project is a simultaneous acknowledgment and disavowal of distinctive

identity. While on the one hand MTV makes visual a diverse range of identities, on the other hand, it also then homogenizes them within post-race, post-gender, post-sexuality, etc. In doing so, "MTV's identity project works to both highlight *and* eradicate differences in contemporary youth cultures" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). The network trades on the production of identity as a lucrative programming focus, yet dispels the significance of how reveling in these diverse identities could provide certain demographics which a sense of empowerment through identification with reality show participants. Those marginalized groups that are seldom represented in mainstream media (for example, Dominicans) could be afforded the rare opportunity of identifying with televisual representations that have resonance with them. Instead, in an attempt to draw in the largest mainstream audience as possible, the representations of difference are diluted through the filter of the MTV reality formula in order to support the logic that, again, "we are all really the same." Recently in 2014, current head of MTV programing Susanne Daniels substantiated this idea when she told *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Lacey Rose: "My inclination is to cast as diverse and multiethnic as possible…I could see shows with African-American leads, Latino leads, Asian leads; ensembles that reflect the rainbow" (hollywoodreporter.com). While at the same time she acknowledges difference, she also places difference within the post-racial discourses that celebrate the rainbow of multicultural America while simultaneously obscuring the reality of living life as an Other in a society still entrenched in white supremacy and normativity.

While it is certainly true, as Klein (2013) contests to, "MTV is not shy about its identity project. Every series has a distinctive look marked by its cinematography, editing,

lighting, and/or soundtrack choices" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). MTV reality programming, consequently, marks difference through distinct production aesthetics that entice audiences to engage in identification, on the one hand, or lack of identification on the other. Furthermore, many instances in MTV's reality programming compel audiences to disavow reality participants on certain shows through the constructing them as clowns, buffoons, or idiots that we should laugh at and mock. Instead of casts consisting of ordinary people who could be anybody, these other types of shows offer up figures who are so extreme that nobody could identify with them. In order to create fresh and original programming but still mitigate financial risk, "Amid the terminal creativity, 'big characters' in 'worlds we haven't seen' has become the reality-TV programmer's mantra to producers" (Wallace 2013: vulture.com). These shows exploit a certain spectacle of Otherness and, therefore, before delving into a direct discussion of *Washington Heights*, it is useful to look at other series that inform and engage with it.

MTV Reality TV as a Spectacle of Containment

While MTV reality programs are not wholly identical to one another, there does seem to be a large degree of carry-over among them in terms of style, format, and theme. As a result, MTV's reality development strategy has been to recycle formats and re-cast the players from different U.S. demographic groups or relocate the setting to locations in which they have not yet filmed. The basic formulas remain the same, just tweaked a bit to appear original, or at the very least not a complete re-hashing of previous series. MTV has operated under the assumption that if *The Real World* is a proven formula, then putting an

ensemble cast of strangers on the road in a Winnebago merely shifts the setting. And if *Jersey Shore* is a ratings smash hit, then replacing Italian-Americans living in New Jersey with rural southerners living in West Virginia in *Buckwild* would draw a similar audience.

Borrowing from Sherri Roberts's (1993) conceptualization of a "spectacle of containment," I contend that what MTV is doing in these identity-of-the-month series is exploiting difference in a way that both makes it visible while simultaneously discrediting it. These programs point a spot light at eccentric, exaggerated, and over-the-top characters, yet through the show their performances of selves are transformed into masquerades of their "real" identities. This type of representation operates in a similar fashion to what Roberts identified as a "spectacle of containment" in regards to the U.S. "Good Neighbor Policy" era Brazilian starlet Carmen Miranda. She argues that "Masquerade mimics a socially constructed identity in order to conceal, but at the same time to indicate, the absence that exists behind the mask and ultimately to discover the lack of any 'natural'" identity or essence (Roberts 1993: 15). Figures like Carmen Miranda, and I would argue *Jersey Shore* stars Snookie and The Situation, embody an excess of Otherness and therefore are presenting a parody of themselves. Their exaggerated personas, in and of themselves, mock the tropes that they are self-presenting through.

Also useful in examining these programs that use Otherness as televisual spectacle is bell hooks's (1992) scholarship on the commodification of Otherness. She posits that the seduction of difference, what she refers to as "a bit of the Other," adds spice to a mainstream culture that is interpreted as bland and is used to "enhance the blank landscape of whiteness" (hooks 1992: 29). What was authentically unique and different

about the Other is consumed through its appropriation which works as a destructive force that "not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of the Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (hooks 1992: 31). The world of the Other becomes a playground for white mainstream society where they can indulge in a reality that is exciting, intense, and threatening all at the same time. The combination of both pleasure and danger that constitutes the represented world of the Other opens up a space for exploration among a generation of white youth who are in a constant process of identity construction and articulation. For hooks, "The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (21). Series like *Jersey Shore*, and now *Buckwild* and *Washington Heights*, use the Other as source to add variety to what they see as proven reality programming formats.

For much of MTV's reality programming "location breeds identity" (Klein 2013: judgmentalobserver.com). A paradigm established by shows like *Laguna Beach* and *Jersey Shore* positions what is new about MTV reality programming within a place-centric representation of identity—Laguna Beach becomes the epicenter of white affluent femininity and the Jersey Shore the home of the Italian-American "guido." Yet the affluent white ladies of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* are not made into the spectacle that the casts of *Jersey Shore*, *Buckwild*, and, sometimes, *Washington Heights* are. Klein (2013) explains that "The *Jersey Shore* cast members actively and self-consciously construct 'guido' identities for themselves while those on *Buckwild* tell MTV's cameras what it means to be 'country'" (judgmentalobserver.com). This observation prompts me to ask: outside of the off-

whiteness (Negra 2001) associated with each cast, what is being done televisually to turn *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild* into spectacles of Otherness that become contained within the parameters of MTV reality programming and branding?

Jersey Shore was not only a ratings hit for MTV, but a pop culture phenomenon. Loved by fans yet hated and degraded by critics, *Jersey Shore* was in many ways very similar to the numerous MTV reality programs that came before it: take a group of twenty-something strangers, make them live together in a swanky house, and watch the drinking and fighting ensue. However, with *Jersey Shore*, MTV added a new ingredient to the formula: eccentric and exaggerated Italian-American ethnicity.

Figure 2.1: Scene from Final Season of *Jersey Shore* where cast members are participating in the activities that sustained the show: drinking, fighting, and fooling around.

Figure 2.2: The "Guidettes" Snookie, JWoww, and Sammie Sweetheart getting ready for a night at the club during their season in Miami.

Season one's cast consisted of eight self-identified "guidettes" and "guidos" who shared a house in the Jersey Shore town of Seaside Heights. 495 Productions's *Jersey Shore* spent four of its six seasons on the Jersey Shore—filming one season in Miami and one in Italy. The cameras followed their lives and documented their self-articulation of New Jersey-oriented Italianness. Kraszweski (2010) argues that the cast of *Jersey Shore* were "merely a bunch of Italian American stereotypes ripped from an understanding of historical ethnicities" which reinforced myths of white ethnic Otherness by suggesting that "Italian American identity can be reduced to blowouts, poufs, tans, and ripped bodies that look like Rambo's" (flowtv.org). From the very first episode, the cast members actively discuss with each other and the audience—through typically MTV confessional segments—how much they identify with their Italian-American identity. A common Italian flag motif emblazes their clothes, phones, computers, etc. and their weekly Sunday dinner together—which everyone was expected to attend, no matter how much they are feuding with each other at

the moment—are all techniques the show uses to emphasize an exaggerated Italian ethnic identity. The cast's performance of extreme ethnic Otherness is transformed into a spectacle of Otherness and a cartoonish masquerade, all of which make for reality TV gold for MTV. On the one hand, audiences could take the show with a grain of salt and embrace it as "silly television…and by that measure, *Shore* is phenomenal," as *Entertainment Weekly*'s Tim Stack recommends (quoted in Kraszewski 2010: flowtv.org). Yet on the other, as Kraszewski (2010) explains, "Popular discourse surrounding *Jersey Shore* fixates on the cartoonish version of Italian American identity on the series; currently critics seem stuck on whether or not we should take pleasure in this cartoon" (flowtv.org). The show is ridiculed for depicting behavior that could reflect poorly on Italian-Americans as a whole, yet it is this over-the-top behavior that draws the show's large audience.

Italian-Americans and New Jersey have long been connected within the U.S. popular imagination. Mobsters, wise-guys, greasers, and tough broad Italian mothers have traditionally been represented as the bread and butter of New Jersey's Italian-American population (Messina 2004; Giannino 2013). In *Jersey Shore*, the state of New Jersey and the excessive ethnicity of the series' cast members are conflated—New Jersey is constructed as the home of the guidette/guido, an Italian-American hothead whose primary interests in life are GTL (gym-tan-laundry), partying, and sleeping around. Public and critical outrage concerning how the show's cast might denigrate Italian-Americans and foster "negative" stereotypes is not hard to find. While Italians/Italian-Americans have long been stereotyped in U.S. media, they are not necessarily under-represented. Therefore, even though *Jersey Shore* might trade on tropes of Italian-American Otherness, it does not carry a

burden of representation to the extent of *Washington Heights*'. For all the social criticism the series has faced, it never received enough opposition to mitigate its enormous ratings draw.

After *Jersey Shore*'s finale season in 2012, MTV sought to replace it with something that could match its ratings. Along with a handful of *Jersey Shore* spinoffs—*The Pauley D Project* (2012), *Snookie & Jwoww* (2012-present), and *The Show with Vinny* (2013)—MTV greenlit reality series *Buckwild* and *Washington Heights* to air early in 2013. Hoping to reproduce the magic of *Jersey Shore*, *Buckwild* included an ensemble cast of young twenty-somethings partying, making mischief, and going "buckwild" in rural West Virginia. Instead of the boardwalks and clubs of the New Jersey Shore, the cast of *Buckwild* went "mudding,"[34] shooting, and engaged in general reckless, drunken behavior. Sold to MTV as "Redneck *Jersey Shore*," the Zoo Productions producers, who were West Virginia-raised, imagined a series that "would follow a loose group of friends, and friends of friends, having the kind of cheap, resourceful fun they'd had themselves as kids. 'It was *Jersey Shore* meets *Jackass*,' says executive producer J. P. Williams, who grew up in nearby Morgantown" (Wallace 2013: vulture.com). Similar to the outrage *Jersey Shore* ignited, *Buckwild* received much media attention and ridicule for its depictions of rural America that aligned with the standing stereotypical tropes of the hillbilly, redneck, hick, and country bumpkin (Harkins 2005). Even before the show aired, "It got early buzz, after West Virginia senator Joe Manchin III, having apparently neglected to study how Jersey Shore's critics had only helped power its

[34] According to Urban Dictionary, mudding is an activity involving going "out in the mud in the back of a truck or jeep or other 4x4 vehicle and spin in the mud until all the occupants are covered in mud" (urbandictionary.com).

success, called Buckwild 'a travesty' that trafficked in 'ugly, inaccurate stereotypes about the people of West Virginia'" (Wallace 2013: vulture.com). Furthermore, the show was, in fact, a hit. Even though it never reached *Jersey Shore* numbers, the network easily renewed it for a second season.

Figure 2.3: Cast of *Buckwild* "mudding"

Taking over *Jersey Shore*'s vacated time slot, *Buckwild* recycled its format and fell right into place amongst MTV reality programming. Klein (2013) gestures towards the change in setting and activities of *Buckwild*'s cast but insists that the series was still "highly generic: we have a group of unemployed or underemployed young people in their late teens and early twenties drinking, having sex, and passing the time, believing that their way of life, their *identities*, are unique enough to warrant the presence of constant camera surveillance" (judgmentalobserver.com).

Clearly defining much of MTV's formulaic reality programming, *Jersey Shore*, *Buckwild*, *Slednecks* (the network's follow-up to *Buckwild*), and in many ways *Washington Heights*, exploit Otherness as a televisual spectacle, just in highly differentiated ways.

THE HILLS IN THE HEIGHTS OR QUISQUEYA[35] *SHORE*?

Having the potential to introduce Dominicans to a U.S. mainstream audience that is more or less unfamiliar with this community, MTV's show *Washington Heights* was the first mainstream television program to have a Dominican-centric premise. Gigantic! Productions, who produce what they call "docu-series," is the production company behind the New York City-centered *Washington Heights* that premiered on January 9, 2013, with a double episode. The show follows the lives of axial figure JP (a.k.a. Audubon) and his group of tightknit friends. Reyna, Frankie, Ludwin, Jimmy, Rico, and Fred are all Dominican-Americans who grew up together in Washington Heights. Taylor, the one white cast member, also grew up in the same neighborhood but is really more a case of reverse tokenism within the otherwise all Dominican cast. However, the real outsider within the group is Jimmy's girlfriend Eliza, who might be Dominican but grew up in New Jersey and not in "the Heights." According to the show's co-creator, Beck Hickey, "We wanted to show a positive side to the neighborhood, and the people in it…The neighborhood is beautiful and rich, but there are also these hardworking young adults with goals and aspirations" (as quoted in Garcia 2013: theuptowner.org). To Hickey's credit, the series as a whole did

[35] Quisqueya is the Taino Indian name for the island of Hispaniola and has been appropriated in NYC to claim or mark Dominican presence in the city. The name adorns businesses and Washington Heights itself is sometimes referred to as "Quisqueya Heights."

champion the struggle and successes of the cast and promote neighborhood pride. However, this was done in a fashion that fundamentally obscured the vibrancy of the neighborhood's Dominican culture in an attempt to produce an *American* success narrative.

The MTV audience was guided into televisual *dominicanidad* in the first moments of the series as JP narrates, "these ain't the Hollywood Hills, these are the Heights. One of the last true neighborhoods left in Manhattan." With this statement, *Washington Heights* separates itself from the luxury and glamour of series like *The Hills* while at the same time inviting comparisons between the two shows. Most importantly, it gestures towards how identity in each show is more or less exnominated; for *The Hills* the backdrop of affluent whiteness is ever present but rarely mentioned and in *Washington Heights* Dominican-ness is immediately understood but then quickly subsumed into the repetitious association of being "from the Heights." Televisually, *Washington Heights* is more similar to the likes of *The Hills* and *Laguna Beach* while discursively there are clear links between it and the ethnic spectacle of containment *Jersey Shore* epitomizes.

Like most first episodes of a series, the first episode of *Washington Heights* functioned primarily as an introduction to the cast. It also set up the narrative for each cast member, eluded to intragroup dynamics, and heralded towards a definition of Washington Heights as a neighborhood. With voice-over commentary by JP structuring the flow of the episode, viewers were guided through the televisually defined neighborhood. In essence, Washington Heights became more than a location, it was fashioned as both the backdrop and the inspiration for the show's creatively inclined cast. Much of the discursive and

televisual framing labors to designate and inform audiences as to what it means to be "from the Heights" in an almost mythical fashion.

Televisually, the neighborhood of Washington Heights is structured through sweeping outdoor establishing shots and quick inclusions of landmarks that connote more of a NYC-centric theme than a nod to Dominican culture. Instead, the show displays a city that is very familiar to the television landscape, just this time from the vantage point of the Uptown residents of Washington Heights. Quick shots showcasing street signs, subway stops, and aerial views directed south towards the heart of Manhattan (as opposed to making Midtown Manhattan the vantage point as is most commonly the case) tell the visual story of the neighborhood. The audience can now orient the neighborhood on a map of Manhattan (being provided with the cross streets, orientation to the George Washington Bridge, and the subway stations) but little more is accomplished from these establishing shots by the second unit shooting team. Aside from situating Washington Heights as an important neighborhood among the countless enclaves in NYC, little in this footage explores or explains the Dominican presence.

Figure 2.4: Shot of the 181th Street Subway Station

Figure 2.5: Vantage point shot centering the view from Washington Heights gazing towards Midtown Manhattan and New Jersey via the George Washington Bridge

The show then transitions back into the story with sweeping shots of the city and music whose lyrics are about New York or Washington Heights specifically (ever so often peppered with untranslated/unsubtitled Spanish lyrics). But these sweeping shots contain very little inclusion of Dominican/Dominican-American cultural markers. They could be of almost any working-class neighborhood in NYC. There are no storefronts displaying Dominican foods, products, or services, there are no billboards or overhangs with Spanish

language on them, and outside of the occasional street sign that acknowledges certain intersections of which those familiar with Washington Heights would be aware, there is nothing in these shots that signal the Dominican-ness of this neighborhood. The only glimpses into the *dominicanidad* of the neighborhood come through the infrequent and brief, sometimes incredibly brief, flashes of the Dominican flag.

Figure 2.6: Exterior establishing shots showcasing the display of small Dominican flags, signaling the presence of those of Dominican heritage

The virtual invisibility of *dominicanidad* televisually is reinforced by its discursive absence. While the majority of the show's cast self-identify and identify each other as "Dominican," this identification is never contextualized or explained. What this does on a discursive level is equate being "Dominican" with being a member of almost any upwardly mobile immigrant group in a city that hosts immigrant communities from almost every country in the world. Instead of being represented in relation to the various experiences of the plethora of ethnic enclaves within NYC and demonstrating what is unique about Dominican culture, it suggests that Washington Heights should be understood within the

traditional NYC-centric immigrant narrative. Unlike the way the neighborhood was commonly described by my interviewees, as a piece of the Dominican Republic positioned within NYC, the show frames the neighborhood as a piece of NYC that is inhabited by Dominicans.

Discursively, the most prominent element is the NYC vernacular English spoken with a NYC accent. A bilingual community, most of the Dominicans/Dominican-Americans in Washington Heights speak both English and Spanish fluently. Furthermore, they also use "Spanglish" variants as well as code-switching between Spanish and English effortlessly. In what is one of the only examples of this linguistic flexibility, a scene in which Jimmy receives a phone call informing him that he has just made a baseball team that will give him an opportunity to play ball professionally, the audience is shown him using English and then code-switching to Spanish. After he receives the call the first thing he does is kiss his girlfriend Eliza sitting next to him and then immediately goes to tell his grandmother, who lives in the same apartment he does, that he has made the team. This is a moment of Dominican cultural specificity that only shows up rarely throughout the season. Not only is the importance of baseball for a young Dominican man highlighted in this scene, but his interaction with his grandmother would be familiar to many young Dominicans living in the U.S. He calls to his grandmother, who is in the kitchen, telling her in Spanish (with English subtitles on the screen) that he has made the team. In a matter of seconds Jimmy goes from celebrating his success with his Dominican-American girlfriend in English to a touching moment in Spanish with his grandmother who has undoubtedly played a large role in his childhood.

Figure 2.7: Jimmy and his grandmother embracing after he shares the news of his success communicated in Spanish and subtitled in English for the MTV audience.

In addition to the dominance of English within the show as produced, the progress narrative of the "American Dream," merely with a Dominican accent, is central to not only the storyline of the first episode but also serves as the organizing narrative theme for the entire series. In the first episode, JP tells viewers that "we ain't got much in our pockets, but we have *big* dreams." Each episode moves the cast closer towards their individual goals where by season's end the series has, more or less, delivered on its set-up progress narrative. The season ends with an aspirational tone: JP is on his way to success as a musical artist, Fred has been accepted to the prestigious FIT for fashion design, Rico is a working actor, Frankie is making a name for herself performing poetry, Reyna is finding her own independence through acquiring a job and moving out of her boyfriend's apartment, Jimmy is finding success in his baseball career, and Ludwin is moving to Boston to pursue his artistic dreams. JP, through his narration, affirms his desires for the show when he tells the

audience, “When I say that I want to rep the Heights, that’s what I mean…I want to show people our voice.” In this statement, JP defines the Dominican experience in the U.S. in a way audiences are very familiar with. Rooting his progress firmly within Washington Heights and NYC ethnic enclave identification, JP makes it easy for non-Dominican audience members to draw parallels between the experiences of the cast members and the experiences of previous generations within their own families. However, by pairing the Dominican struggle in the U.S. with the discourses of the “American Dream” *Washington Heights*, while possibly attempting to connect with a wider mainstream audience, obscures the specific and unique conditions of Dominicans in the U.S. and subsequently dilutes *dominicanidad*.

The Dominican Darling of Mainstream Cultural Critics

Arguably it is because of its championing of a progress narrative emerged within the discourses of the “American Dream” that, comparatively, *Washington Heights* did not face the mainstream criticism or disdain received by *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild*; in fact critics reviewed it very favorably. The *Hollywood Reporter*’s Allison Keene (2013) praised the series, writing:

> *Washington Heights* certainly shares more with series like *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* than the travesties of *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild* because the youth portrayed actually seem (at least to start off) sincere. Like *Laguna Beach*, *Washington Heights* has a primary narrator who is one of the group: In the former show it was (initially) Lauren Conrad, and in this incarnation it’s JP, a.k.a. Audubon, an up-and-coming hip-hop artist who seems to have genuine talent (hollywoodreporter.com).

Keene is not alone among the mainstream press in lauding of the show; much of the initial entertainment press cited the show's high production value, cinematic style of filming and music score, and the "positive" progress narrative. Keene exemplifies the favorable entertainment media response to the show when she contends that "it feels both fresh and familiar—the scene is new, but the story is old. There's drama, but not as much trash. Which, unfortunately for it, may not make enough headlines to warrant the success it probably deserves" (Keene 2013: hollywoodreporter.com). Praised for its *The Hills*-like production quality, *Washington Heights* was consistently reviewed as a better show than the likes of *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild.*

Yet if *Washington Heights* is in many ways more similar to the cinematic style of *The Hills*, why even compare the show with the more silly and over-the-top, and therefore ridiculed, group of MTV reality shows? Featuring brooding young people and their melodramatic relationships, the fact that the cast hails from a Dominican heritage is only lightly touched on. Unlike *Jersey Shore*, *Washington Heights* does not take every opportunity to capitalize on visual displays of ethnic culture. Instead of a spectacle of containment, *Washington Heights*, borrowing from hooks's terms, takes a "bit of the Other" and adds it into MTVs lifestyle-centric reality programming format. Playfully referred to as "*The Hills* in the Heights" by Dania, the show was set in what many consider the epicenter for Dominican culture and lifestyle in the U.S., and, therefore, one would assume that some of this vibrant cultural expression would appear on screen. Yet the show neglected to highlight the things that make Washington Heights unique among other areas of NYC, making it seem as though this could be anywhere in NYC from the South Bronx to

Williamsburg. The show instead becomes a celebration of the hardscrabble life of living in NYC, and in that way is far more similar to MTV's foray into the highly stylized and escapist series of *The Hills*. As seen below (Figures 2.8 and 2.9), a quick look at the title cards of each of these four series demonstrate the visual similarity between *The Hills* and *Washington Heights* when compared to *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild*.

Figure 2.8: Title shots for series *Buckwild* and *Jersey Shore* demonstrate the similar production style among MTV programming trading in the spectacle of containment.

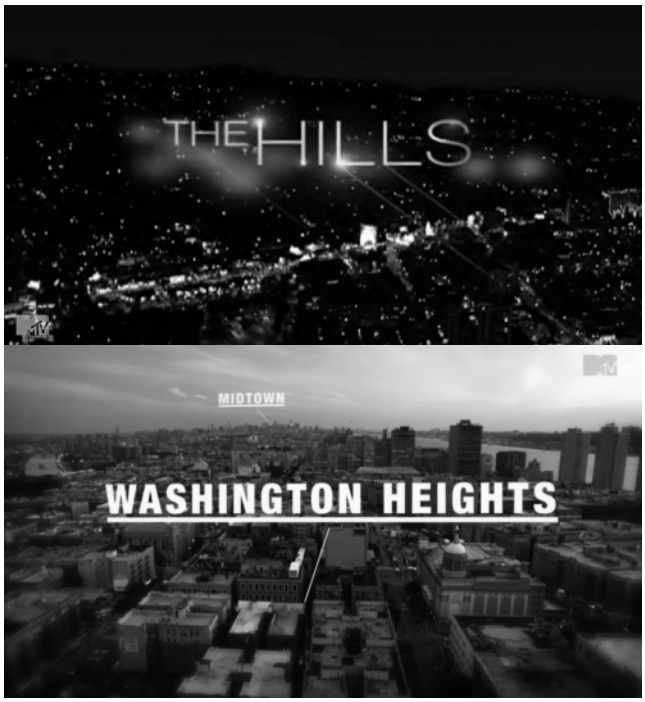

Figure 2.9: The similarities between the title shots for *The Hills* and *Washington Heights* exhibit the locational and lifestyle-centric vein of MTV reality programming.

While not mimicking the glamorous lifestyle of *The Hills*, *Washington Heights* does build on the conventions the show helped to institutionalize. Elizabeth Affuso (2009) explains that, "While, both *The Hills* and *Laguna Beach* are ostensibly reality

programs, they are seen as a new kind of reality, programs that are narrative based and are cast to appear like the fiction dramas that the shows are an outgrowth of" (ejumpcut.org). Called out for the amount of scripting involved in this "un-scripted" series, *The Hills*, specifically, shares much of its aesthetic with film and high production value TV dramas. The show is filmed with a telephoto lens, uses cinematic lighting techniques, includes a high degree of staging and "character" blocking, and often employs non-diegetic music to enhance and shape the narrative. The editing of the narrative also operates differently than other MTV reality shows where "In place of a confessional the show gives Lauren [Conrad] a voiceover narration to transition from scene to scene, aligning her with the protagonists of fiction shows and allowing her to provide some introspective reflection on what is happening onscreen" (Affuso 2009: ejumpcut.org). The program's televisual cinematography and calculated mise-en-scéne—which also provides ample opportunity for product placement and indorsement—defines a separate vein of MTV reality programming, one that deviates from the paradigm established through *The Real World*. Instead of the "shot on the fly" style that has characterized most MTV reality programs, "By mimicking the aesthetics of primetime serialized dramas and mainstream Hollywood releases, *The Hills* associates its subjects less with the 'authentic' world of reality TV and more with the world of fantasy" (Klein 2011: Flowtv.org). Sweeping establishing shots, beautiful people, opulent settings, and high fashion define *The Hills* to its audience.

From a production standpoint, *Washington Heights* is far more similar to MTV's lifestyle-focused programming. And, essentially, the difference between *The Hills* and *Washington Heights* is that "*Washington Heights* is a docu-drama for the 2010s and the recession, where hair extensions are traded in for thick-framed glasses, tennis skirts for high-waisted shorts, and privileged white kids from the O.C. in their late teens through early twenties for their Dominican counterparts in a less privileged area of New York" (Keene 2013: hollywoodreporter.com). *Washington Heights* does not offer the guilty pleasure experience that *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild* do. Instead it utilizes ethnoracial Otherness as a way to re-create MTV's cinematic lifestyle programming, just not one of white affluence (unlike *The Hills*). *Washington Heights* could not entice fans of shows like *Jersey Shore* because it did not, for the most part, depict the participants as exaggerated portrayals of excessive Otherness. Yet the series could not attract fans of *The Hills* as, while very much a celebration of lifestyle, it was not a show that portrayed a glamorous and aspirational lifestyle that *The Hills* fans had been drawn to. As a hybrid of both types of programming, *Washington Heights* was unable to attract either audience. *Washington Heights*, on the one hand, tried to mimic an inclusion of Otherness utilized by *Jersey Shore*, whose appeal, according to Klein (2011), was "based on making visible the ethnicity, class, and geographical location of its subjects, all of whom suffer real world consequences (such as jailtime) for their actions" (Klein 2011: Flowtv.org). Yet on the other hand, the show attempted to borrow its approach to

production style from the cinematic *The Hills*. *Washington Heights* combined both production techniques; it had the highly stylized feel of *The Hills* but the ethnic specificity of *Jersey Shore*.

Before discussing the reception of the show among Dominican audiences, which is pointedly different from its reception in mainstream entertainment media coverage, I would like to directly look at one review appearing in the mainstream media coverage that offers a more nuanced examination of the series. Monika Fabian, who works as an ABCnews.com Fusion contributor, problematizes *Washington Heights* in relation to the overall MTV reality programming canon and suggests that just because the show employs a Dominican cast,

> That doesn't mean that "Washington Heights" is the new "Jersey Shore." Stylistically, the northern Manhattan soap's slick production values and perfectly framed camera shots are more in line with "Laguna Beach" and "The Hills." The cast of aspiring performers, artists, and athletes is much more glossy and self-aware than the guidos were in their debut season too (Fabian 2013: abcnews.go.com).

Fabian both recognizes the immense burden of representation the show faced as well as questions whether or not MTV sacrificed Dominican authenticity for mainstream audience appeal. For her, "what's missing from 'Washington Heights' is a true depiction of the rich, bicultural uptown Dominican (-American) culture" (Fabian 2013: abcnews.go.com). Unlike *Jersey Shore*, which inundates audiences with material aspects of its construction of Italian-Americans—Snookie's hair poofs, the GTL slogan, and fist pumping dance moves, to name but a few—*Washington Heights* is almost devoid of

culturally specific references that could teach mainstream audiences about the Dominican-American experience or that could be recognized and identified with by Dominicans within the U.S. Instead, in the production of the series "the unique local color is saved for sweeping establishing shots. Stylized imagery trumps authenticity on 'Washington Heights'" (Fabian 2013: abcnews.go.com).

Fabian speculates as to why, unlike *Buckwild* and *Jersey Shore*, *Washington Heights* does not exaggerate Dominican culture to the point of mockery, suggesting that:

> Lack of positive representations in mainstream culture seem to have weighted on "Washington Heights" producers and the desire to create a positive portrayal to counteract drug-dealing stereotypes in hip-hop songs might've forced their hand. So we end up with a pasteurized version of uptown Dominican-American culture as a result. One that aims to be more palatable, but becomes innocuous and flavorless instead (abcnews.go.com).

Essentially, in order to avoid falling victim to those very limited and stereotypical tropes of Dominican representation that do appear in mainstream U.S. media, the show instead avoided most cultural references altogether. Outside of a random exchange in Spanish with more elderly relatives and a few Dominican flags, there is not much in *Washington Heights* that reflects *dominicanidad*. One could see how members of the Dominican community would be disappointed with this very weak showing of their culture on a network that has branded itself through their identity project. However, as Fabian astutely points out, "No one expects a single show about white people to depict all of white culture…Yet here we have a show…and we want them to get it totally right.

Now that we've caught a glimpse of our blocks and brown faces on TV, we want to see all of ourselves and our lives on the screen" (abcnews.go.com).

"FINALLY! DOMINICANS ON TV": MTV'S *WASHINGTON HEIGHTS* AND *DOMINICANIDAD*

As the first Dominican-centric mainstream television show, the news of the upcoming *Washington Heights* was a hot topic among NYC Dominicans and its airing was, initially, highly anticipated. However, the show's representation of Dominican-Americans and its limited inclusion of Dominican culture ultimately appears to have proved disappointing to much of the Dominican community. During my fieldwork, I heard criticisms that ranged from those common of many reality series—it felt scripted, the cast did not have genuine relationships with each other, editors manipulated footage to ramp up drama, etc.—to outright rejection of the series as a representation of real Dominicans in NYC. Obviously facing an upward battle against the burden of representation, the show was unable to satisfy Dominican expectations. Many lamented the way *dominicanidad* was portrayed on the show, insisting that the show was not an authentic representation of their lives and identity. Granted, *Washington Heights* had channel specific industrial constraints due to practices of constructing programming for the MTV audience—as I detailed above. Yet there is something to be said of the show's inability to resonate with the Dominican community it claimed to be featuring.

According to the blog LatinoRebles.com (2013), *Washington Heights* was, predictably, a missed opportunity. The blog suggested:

> Here is the main problem with "Washington Heights:" it could actually work in the media landscape if there was other programming that would balance it out. That is, if there were shows that DIDN'T try to push the stereotypes, then shows like "Washington Heights" would have to feel the pressure of trying to authentically portray what is in fact a very vibrant part of NYC. Instead, we get an MTV version of a neighborhood and now the whole world will think that this is what the real Washington Heights is all about. It isn't, and MTV failed, but hey, it's MTV, what are you expecting? (latinorebels.com).

This post clearly understands the stakes involved in MTV's identity project. Recognizing that part of MTV's industrial strategy includes the exploitation of Otherness, the blog's major complaint is that MTV was fundamentally insensitive towards the show's potential burden of representation. Unsurprisingly, MTV was more concerned with ratings than their responsibility as the first mainstream media outlet to significantly include Dominicans. The problem is not that MTV was trading on exaggerated Otherness to entice audiences (like they did in *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild*), but that they situated ethnoracial difference as the key component that makes *Washington Heights* original and distinct while never taking the care to be sensitive to the fact that this would be the first introduction to Dominicans and their culture that a mass mainstream audience has come across.

Platino Wishes and *Presidente* Dreams: MTV's Approach to an Ethnic Enclave Community

Occasionally referred to as "Little DR" by some New Yorkers, Washington Heights is an area that both looks and feels like a Dominican city. From the array of vendors lining every street to the salons specializing in Dominican blow-outs, the Heights' enclave reality has constructed the perfect environment for Dominican cultural retention. According to Jorge Duany (2008), Washington Heights' "Dominican atmosphere, with its Spanish-speaking stores and employment opportunities for Hispanics, was a key attraction for many immigrants. The desire to preserve their cultural identity led many Dominicans to Washington Heights. The neighborhood thus became a transnational space, an American landscape reshaped by Dominican culture" (48). Within this enclave, over the past three decades Dominicans have created a thriving incipient enclave economy, building small business networks and shared cultural environments. Furthermore, even though the streets of Manhattan are hardly a substitute for the rural Dominican *campo*, inside their homes, Dominicans display religious signs and images, Dominican flags and coat-of-arms, and Dominican folk art that "graphically recreated a Dominican atmosphere in Washington Heights" (Duany 2008: 41). In Washington Heights, products, foods, and news from the Dominican Republic are never hard to find. During my fieldwork in the neighborhood I could easily go an entire day without speaking English or finding a bodega that didn't sell the

Dominican national beer Presidente. Even as the residents of Washington Heights are increasingly U.S.-born, "Many Dominicans in New York—or *Dominican-Yorks*, as their compatriots on the island call them—live suspended between two worlds, two islands, two flags, two languages, two nation-states" (Duany 2008: 27).

Unfortunately, MTV chose to ignore the cultural context of the show's namesake by excluding it from both the overall narrative as well as the mise-en-scéne. Those Dominicans who actually live in "the Heights" saw this as a glaring omission of the heart and soul of the area. Junior told me "It wasn't really like the Heights…wasn't a faithful look at the Heights." Ciel commented that it was the "First time you see young…Spanish speakers of Caribbean descent being represented on TV. A lot of people criticized it…Some of the realness was censored, I would like to see how they really would act. Like they might speak more Spanish." Many claimed the show had no substance, lacked the same "vibe" as the actual community, and failed to depict much, if any, aspects of Dominican cultural life.

Julissa Bonfante of *The Huffington Post*, was part of the website's online coverage of the premier of the MTV series. She served as a member of a talking-heads format panel that was assembled to offer critical responses to a show that many were apprehensive of. One of her columns for the uber-blog was particularly inciting to *Huffington Post* readers who used its comment section as a place to hash out ethnoracial tensions concerning Dominicans as the newest dominant population in an

area of NYC that has changed inhabitants over the generations—as one immigrant group develops roots and upward mobility in the U.S., another one replaces them in this economical neighborhood of an otherwise very expensive Manhattan. Bonfante (2013) wrote:

> Like many of my Dominican friends, we were glued to the premiere of MTV's *Washington Heights* last night. The introductory images, the landmarks, the legendary George Washington bridge, got us all sentimental and reminiscing about our childhood…I was born and raised there…This is "one of the true neighborhoods left in Manhattan," says Jonathan "JP" Perez and "Audubon"—the group's peacekeeper and the show's producer—in the introduction, but I was disappointed not to see some of those true and unique aspects of this vibrant community. It was missing the authentic "Dominicanness" that characterizes the neighborhood…The show has to strike a balance to appeal to the mainstream. But can the show be successful without sacrificing that Dominicanness that is synonymous with the neighborhood? Maybe this is just the new Washington Heights and I'm just old school (huffingtonpost.com).

This column was nostalgic and mimicked the neighborhood pride that propelled the thematic arc of the first two episodes (aired back to back on premier night) of *Washington Heights*. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, the first inflammatory comment in response to the self-reflective insight of Bonfante's column read:

> I'm getting a little more than fed up with [this] nonsense. Dominicans did NOT invent, find, discover or create Washington Heights. Before they landed there and ruined that perfectly good area 40 or so years ago, it was Irish, German, Jewish, Russian and Greek. And before them it was Native American, Dutch and whatever else…it irks me to no end that Dominicans swear up and down that they were the first ones that landed there (huffingtonpost.com).

And the comments spiral out of control from there into a racial and ethnic bashing of Dominicans. As is the nature of NYC ethnic enclaves, the neighborhood has, admittedly,

gone through many cultural transitions—Washington Heights has had a revolving presence of various ethnic groups throughout its history: Jews, Irish, Greeks, Puerto Ricans and now Dominicans—and currently faces a struggle with gentrification. Now that Brooklyn is becoming more expensive, Washington Heights' relatively low rental prices and its significant decrease in crime rates over the last decade have enticed many young non-Dominicans to settle in the area. And while there are areas—for example the area of blocks I lived in during my fieldwork in the neighborhood—where gentrification has won the battle with Dominicans for control of the area's apartment buildings and small businesses, the Dominicans of Washington Heights have fiercely resisted gentrifying trends. In an attempt to call out such flagrant intolerance as the previous post, one poster commented:

> Clearly people here are dealing with pent up, racial issues that have nothing to do with the show at all. For the person who said Washington Heights' time has come and gone, that might be the case for you and your personal memory of the good OLD days but the truth is, Washington Heights (just like Soho and Tribeca) is a NYC neighborhood that's here to stay. Who knows, 20 or 30 years from now it may once again be reminicent [sic] of what your memory of hood was but realistically speaking... I highly doubt that (huffingtonpost.com).

The sentiments expressed in these two comments continued to be exchanged over the next few days, as documented in the column's comments section.

Pointing out Bonfante's column to her own readers, Senior Contributing Editor for the blog Politic360.com, Adriana Maestas calls out the inflammatory response received by the native Washington Heights resident Bonfante. The comments thread of

Maestras's post re-directs the discussion of the show from prejudice and xenophobia to a more problematized discussion of the best way to represent Dominican culture to mainstream U.S. audiences. One poster comments:

> The foods, the music, the sounds, the smells, the sights [are] what makes Washington Heights a Dominican neighborhood, or Irish, or Jewish; the languages portrayed, the locations used; all of these things were not true to what Washington Heights is…the Heights is not just fancy-ish restaurants, chilling on rooftops, poetry reads, and baseball. The heights is also loud barbershops, overstocked grocery stores, frio frio's, juice carts selling fresh squeezed OJ on the street, fruit carts, little boys and girls running around the block, grandma's yelling at their grand-kids, small apartments, Casa del Mofongo, Rice and Beans to go, cachapas, Nemos, Platanos (I mean how the heck did a mention to Plantains not happen within the first two episodes) (Politic360.com).

The poster goes on to insist that it is not that the show is inaccurate per se, but not "fully accurate," as it only represents the Washington Heights that resonates with newer generations of Dominican-Americans. The comment does make it seem like a fruitless endeavor to try to chastise MTV for not remaining true to the Dominican character of a neighborhood whose character blows in the direction of each new group that calls it home. However, the second thing this comment does is it legitimizes the significant Dominican influence in Washington Heights and NYC more broadly. What bothers most people online who are discussing the show is that MTV's motivations resided in the bottom line and not in the potential to shine a spotlight on a vibrant Dominican cultural foothold in NYC that the ever expanding population of Dominicans in the U.S. could identify with.

Figure 2.10: The cast of *Washington Heights* participating in one of their favorite pastimes: hanging out on the roof of an apartment building, talking, and drinking.

I Want My MTV: Presumed Audience vs. Dominican Identification

However, there were those who were less critical of, and even liked, the show. One particular amazon.com review of the series DVD set, written by a poster calling herself as Morena Dominicana, exclaimed:

> *Me encanta* [I love] Washington Heights! I am Dominican and I just love that we have our own show like i [sic] know the Puerto Ricans are so upset about this but hey we know best! Im [sic] from Miami, Fl thats [sic] the only difference between the cast and I. So far my favorites are hmm... All of them I love them all! Much Love! (amazon.com).

Sentiments that appeared both online and those that were shared during my interviews demonstrated an affinity towards the show among Dominican audiences that seemed to be aligned with three threads of reasoning: (1) many saw the show as a watershed

moment for the entrance of Dominicans into mainstream U.S. media; (2) those who enjoyed the show were self-identified Dominican-Americans who were already a part of MTV's broader target audience of teens and young adults; and (3) while they might not have found the show entertaining, there were those who saw the show as a realistic portrayal of Dominicans born in the U.S. who have a more "Americanized" sensibility. Teens and young adults are MTV's target audience, and if in Washington Heights some of this generational demographic is seen as favoring the American over the Dominican, then their approval and support of the show seems inevitable. Those who prioritize their identification with the millennial generation in the U.S. over ethnic heritage would, presumably, agree with what then head of TV programming at MTV, David Janollar, told thefutoncritic.com's Jim Halterman in 2012: "We are trying to reflect the lives of the core millennium generation, trying to connect with them by speaking their language and portraying characters and storylines that really feel resonant with them."

Gabriela, who was a Dominican-born U.S. citizen, told me "Almost everybody I know was talking about it. Heard that it is good because it is situated in a real environment and that a lot of people were excited for it to come out." The visibility the show afforded the NYC Dominican community was thrilling for many of the Dominicans in the U.S. who have long harbored resentment towards their U.S. mediated invisibility. Junior told me that while he personally thought the series was not faithful to "the Heights" and many important things about the community were left out, his cousin, on

the other hand, liked the show for its originality. Even though this interviewee had his reservations concerning the show based on how MTV did not portray Washington Heights in the way it was seen by the Dominicans that live there, he agrees with his cousin that the show "was a new idea on TV."

As the only person to admit to having seen every episode of the series Carmen, who was Washington Heights born and raised Dominican-American, defended the show and, instead, blamed MTV for the show's inauthentic representation of *dominicanidad*. She was thrilled by the fact that a show featuring NYC Dominicans existed, but the way MTV framed the production and editing of the series drew too heavily on regimes of representation that depict Latina/os as poor. She told me "I liked that the characters were portrayed as artistic and creative. I also found it interesting that the white girl in the show served a token function, instead of the other way around." Painfully aware that the ethnoracial dynamics of ensemble U.S. television casts usually work the opposite way, the nomination of this one cast member's whiteness was a rare treat for her. Also blaming MTV for the series' problems, another interviewee claimed that it was the manner in which the show was edited that removed aspects that could have made the show more authentically Dominican. She suggested that the instances when cast members spoke in Spanish was simply edited out, left on the cutting room floor as moments that would not be interesting or comprehensible to an English-speaking mainstream audience, attesting that "all Dominicans speak Spanish to their families."

She expressed a desire for more inclusion of Dominican culture because as packaged by MTV she believed that:

> [At] certain times the show was more relatable than others, these are just Dominicans that are taking a different route. Like the scenes involving the brothers and their relationship and how the younger brother was in a bit of trouble. I do the same thing with my younger siblings, I try to look out for them and take care of them.

And for her, these limited moments of resonance were enough in consideration that *Washington Heights* was the "first time mainstream U.S. has seen Dominicans as the focus."

One pop culture blogger who was a fan of the cast and the series' premise wrote of the show:

> *Washington Heights* on MTV is an example of a show that failed not because it wasn't good or didn't have a devoted, core audience. It failed because the network it was on didn't believe it would succeed and did absolutely nothing to promote it. MTV doesn't make reality shows about young people of colour, so *Washington Heights*, a show about Dominicans and Latino's living in upper Manhattan was a nice breath of fresh air. Instead of it being Jersey Shore with brown faces, it was about young people trying to make it and do something positive with their lives and their art (mandawhite.wordpress.com).

Instead of critiquing the content of the show, this blogger places blame on MTV for the show's cancelation and lack of ratings. For her, it was not that the show itself was problematic, it was that MTV was unable to give it the attention it deserved. Promoting *Buckwild* in its place, *Washington Heights* did not receive the air time, publicity appearances, or promotion given to most MTV programs.

The claim that MTV did not adequately promote the show might very well be true, but the show most definitely did not go under the radar of the U.S. Dominican community. When discussing mainstream media that include Dominicans with Emmanuel, I was told that he had not gotten around to watching the show yet but that he was very familiar with what other people had thought about it. According to him, "the show was good because it has Dominicans that are trying to make something of themselves and it valued education. But I think it wasn't successful for MTV because it lacked the drama of some of its other shows." He concluded our discussion of the show by reassuring me: "I might need to watch that."

As argued by Luis, *Washington Heights* "turned him off" because it was "too 'Americanized.' It is a show that is very popular among the younger or 'MTV' generation." It is this very reasoning that made the series popular among a certain segment of those I interviewed. The association of the show with this "younger MTV generation" might have repelled some Dominican audiences who identify themselves separately based on notions of generation, yet at the same time it attracted Dominican audiences that place themselves easily within the generational demographic that MTV targets. The importance of generation was exemplified by the 18-year-old Leta[36] who revealed that she,

> Expected there to be a lot of fighting and it wasn't going to be productive. I thought that people would be offended. Many people felt it was going to be

[36] Interview conducted on June 5, 2013 with 18 year old DR-born woman.

> bad, but I liked the story and watched it with my uncle, he is 25. I relate to the show in how everyone on the show seems to know each other and be interconnected. I also relate to the types of activities the show films them doing. Like the barbeques, [they] happen in the summer time.

For her, there were very clearly identifiable elements within the show that reminded her of her own Dominican-American experience. At 18 she is a member of MTV's primary target audience, and it is telling that she seemed to have the most positive reception of the show among all those I interviewed. The show was able to resonate with her on both generational and cultural levels, while others were unable to see any indications of *dominicanidad* within the show. As the youngest of my interviewees, she had the most defined Dominican-*American* identity. She confessed to me that she "didn't really know much about Dominican stuff"; what she is intimately familiar with, however, is the Dominican experience in the U.S. The "Americanized" cast of Dominican heritage did not come off as inauthentic to her, but a reflection of the culture she had been raised within.

"Here We Speak Spanish": The Exclusion of Spanish in *Washington Heights*

Yet even among those younger generations of Dominican-Americans who more or less related to the lifestyle depicted in the show there was still a shared criticism that the series simply did not show the cast speaking Spanish enough. Taking particular issue with the show's portrayal of what he saw as the cultural center of *dominicanidad* in the U.S., Diego stated:

> It is not authentic and I had hoped that the show would have turned out to be a bigger deal. But it lacked narrative conflict and the show's producers fundamentally misunderstood Dominican culture. In the end the show was a big letdown. Being Dominican is more than our music. It depicted the characters as dream chasers and was not a true reflection of Washington Heights.

Clearly the show's failures to include aspects of *dominicanidad* struck a nerve with him, as it did with many other Dominicans in the U.S. For a community that is under-represented and often symbolically erased in mainstream U.S. media, this was a slap in the face. Finally able to potentially see themselves in mainstream media representation as well as introduce their culture to an uninformed mainstream audience, Dominicans in the U.S. had high hopes for this show, yet, were left frustrated with the final product.

For many of the Dominicans I interviewed in NYC, the show and its cast were simply not relatable. For example Tina told me:

> I just didn't relate to the characters on the show at all. The conversations didn't seem to have a natural flow, we don't talk like that. Some of the slang they used was pretty Dominican but their representation of families was distorted. More use of Spanish by the cast would have made it more authentic I think. There was a point that a lot of people in the Dominican community were talking about the show, but the topic died out pretty quick. There was a lot of hype at the beginning, but once it aired people thought it was a shit show and most people were disappointed with it.

The show's limited bilingualism was a particularly sore spot for most of those I interviewed. As a population that does not usually sacrifice retention of their heritage language for assimilation into U.S. society, being bilingual in Washington Heights is the norm. To not see the type of linguistic code switching—which also includes a frequent use of "Spanglish"—was a clear indication to Dominican audiences that the show did

not have the intention of depicting a more "authentic" *dominicanidad*. In my own fieldwork interviews I received a similar response to those that Duany (2008) recorded in his scholarship when he asked the residents of Washington Heights "What makes one Dominican": "The most frequently cited characteristic was the Dominican accent in speaking Spanish, followed by standard references to *merengue* and *comida criolla*, ethnic foodways" (51). It might have been a wise move on the part of *Washington Heights*'s MTV producers to ask a similar question of its cast members as well.

CONCLUSION: TELEVISUAL *DOMINICANIDAD* AS *TROMPE-L'OEIL* EFFECT

How does one explain the mixed reception for the show? Critics adored it, mainstream audiences ignored it, and Dominican audiences saw its exclusion of overt *dominicanidad* as an affront or a disappointment. When thinking about MTV's application of identity as an organizing factor in its reality TV programming, it is important to recognize that "One of the drawbacks of packaging and commercializing authenticity is that it becomes increasingly hard to recognize the real thing" (Wallace 2013: vulture.com). Curnutt (2013) likens this phenomenon to the artistic effect of *trompe-l'oeil*—which is an artistic technique that uses hyper-realistic imagery, making it appear three-dimensional until one is right up close to the piece of art. He contends that "Like *trompe-l'oeil*, the appeal of reality TV for media-savvy viewers comes from the ways in which its verisimilitudes call attention to television's representational limitations

and, by extension, the medium's inability adequately to depict subjectivity" (Curnutt 2013: 301). Put another way, the fact that participants in reality television are "real people" injects an element of realism and, in so doing, reveals the ways in which the program is staged. Drawing on psychoanalytical theory, Curnutt contends that "The participant's image exists within the televisual frame as something seemingly more authentic than the text itself. In this regard, its excessive realism functions as an internal signifier calling attention to the program's own representational constraints" (304). It is not necessarily the participants or the world that they inhabit that is inherently inauthentic, it is the very practice of embedding them into the reality program that disables the ability to discern between what is real and what is staged. Because audiences watch reality programs within a paradigm of suspicion, "in our haste to locate artifice, we run the risk of (mis)recognizing how truthful media that cater to a savvy viewpoint may in fact be" (Curnutt 2013: 309).

Audiences have become trained through the processes by which MTV brands its reality programming, leading them to interpret the narratives of MTV series in very particular ways. Reduced to its most basic function, "Reality TV's *trompe-l'oeil* effect—its staging of its own fraudulent depiction of authenticity—is enabled by the actuality that its participants are, ultimately, what they appear to be" (Curnutt 2013: 306). However, what the *trompe-l'oeil* effect fails to take into account is the influence ethnoracial discourses have on our ability as audiences to interpret a text. Yes the

grapes in the painting might seem like real objects from afar, but if we do not know what grapes are—if we have no cultural understanding of what they essentially are—realizing they are merely painted on a wall does not reveal any truer knowledge of them. The same can be said for the representation of Dominicans within the media format of reality television; at closer look audiences can see the staging involved in their depiction, but without an already existing understanding of Dominicans they are unable to interpret what is authentic and what is not. Furthermore, for Dominican audiences who are hyper-aware of the meanings connoted by elements of the Dominican experience in the U.S., the fact that such representations are contained within a reality program makes their authenticity automatically suspect.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that many of the criticisms being circulated among Dominicans in the U.S. is that the cast of *Washington Heights* is in fact comprised of actors that have no actual ties to the neighborhood in real life. During one interview Alma[37] told me that because she was suspicious as to the veracity of the cast's origin, the show was "illegitimate" in her eyes. She further explained to me, "The promos for the show [she] has seen don't feel representative of [her] community," and furthermore, she does not "want a 'lame' show be the representation of Dominicans."

Whether or not *Washington Heights* is a fair and accurate representation of Dominican-American life in NYC is almost beside the point. As Kraszewski (2014)

[37] Interview conducted on July 20, 2013 with DR-born woman in her early twenties.

illustrates, “Culture emerges not only through screen representations but also more complexly through institutional struggles and strategies to create certain representations, and by the way these representations interact with larger social trends” (241). Regardless of how accurate the show’s depiction of Dominican-ness actually is, it introduces a growing population into the mass U.S. consciousness. It might be for the best that this introduction was done through the platform of reality television, a platform that audiences already engage with through a skeptical lens. Furthermore, as the show never gained a large mainstream following, there may still be better and more mainstream-visible opportunities to introduce *dominicanidad*.

The particular industrial, political, and cultural context of *Washington Heights* makes its appearance significant, but contested. Similar to the exploitation of Otherness that continues to be the hallmark of much of MTV programming—not to mention in mainstream U.S. television more broadly—the introduction of Dominicans/Dominican-Americans into the U.S. media landscape is still threatened by the market’s tendency to consume and de-contextualize difference. The Dominicans whom I interviewed speak to the warning levied by bell hooks who contends that “The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (hooks 1992: 39). The failure of *Washington Heights* to become successful as part of MTV’s reality programming could, in turn, be an

opportunity to hit re-set on the mainstream's introduction to *dominicanidad*. Yet it could just as easily be the first of many media texts that trade on *dominicanidad* as a "bit of the other."

Chapter Three: Online Critical Cultural Study and the "Alternative Ideological Space" of Active Identity Negotiation

I love this! My parents don't live close by but your videos make me feel like I'm home. Keep up the great work!!

Jajajjajjajjaj!!! :))) wooow me encanto jajjaja! Muy buen video... Q rico es ser dominicano ;))
[Hahahhahhahhah!!! :))) wow, I love hahhaha! Very good video…how great it is to be Dominican ;))]

Todo esa verda jjjjjj, best video yet, sigue el good job
[It's all true, best video yet, always do a good job]

The above three quotes, that appeared in response to a video posted on ThatsDominican.com's YouTube Channel, not only reflect the variety of language used among Dominican-American online posters—representing English, Spanish, Spanglish, and bilingualism—but they also speak to the desire of Dominicans to find representations of themselves that resonate with them as a community and as individuals. If one has learned anything from the last two chapters of this dissertation it is that Dominican-Americans rarely have an opportunity to see themselves in

mainstream media, be that films, television, or advertising. Yet, on the internet Dominicans in the U.S. can and have created and consumed media texts containing salient forms of representational *dominicanidad*. However, the internet is hardly a Dominican webtopia, and the various sites that gesture towards representing *dominicanidad* do so to different effects. Furthermore, there is not one, but many, versions of *dominicanidad* articulated in online spaces. The result of this is that I, and the Dominicans I have interviewed, will not have knowledge or understanding of every possible website and how it defines *dominicanidad*. Subsequently, the Dominican online spaces discussed in this chapter are very much informed by the non-digital processes of fieldwork. Therefore, while the scope of the analysis here is not, and cannot be, exhaustive, it is nonetheless rich (or what Anthropologists would call "thick").[38] This chapter speaks to hybridity on multiple levels—hybridity of methodology (online and "real"), hybridity of national identity (Dominican and American), hybridity of language (Spanish and English), and hybridity of experience (both in online and offline spaces).

The proliferations of new media "permit simulations of offline interaction, speedy circulation of social signs and meanings, rapid decomposition and recomposition of messages, and increased transience of socially significant symbols" (Howard 2002: 552). Internet forums are especially well suited for discursive expression and

[38] See Clifford Geertz (1973) on "thick description."

interaction, specifically in the case of those who have transitional, multi-axel, and multi-locational subjectivities. Such spaces provide access for those marginalized groups that have historically been excluded from more mainstream forums as well as operate as a critical means of communication among those whose cyclical movements of immigration do not always coincide with where and how they position their identities.

In this chapter, I construct an online critical cultural study through the combination of: (1) a critical analysis of three Dominican-centric websites (ThatsDominican.com, ESENDOM.com, and DR1.com), (2) an industrial analysis and reception study of these websites, and (3) an investigation rooted in both online and traditional fieldwork-based methods into the community building function of these websites as Dominican-centric internet forums. While these approaches are not innovative in and of themselves, the combination of the three offers a methodological intervention into how audience research is conducted within media studies. Pushing beyond analyzing ratings, online comments, and shallow surveys of audience reception, the analysis in this chapter reflects the experiences of Dominican in the U.S. in ways most reception studies cannot. I put each method in dialogue and, subsequently, am able to move beyond informed speculation as to the minds of audiences and media producers. Furthermore, this chapter paints a more complete and nuanced picture of the relationship between U.S. Dominicans and media.

Based on her own internet audience study, Molina-Guzmán (2010) suggests that "Blogs and discussion boards allow audiences from diverse gender, class, ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds to collaboratively produce *alternative ideological spaces* to interpret and reaffirm oppositional identity formations" (*emphasis added*, 21). Before the introduction of the World Wide Web, media had many ideological spaces, just mainstream ones that adhered to dominant ideological norms. While still present online, there is also space for alternative ideologies to represent, engage audiences, and proffer social criticism. Cyberspace also has the ability to unite like-minded individuals who would have not been able to congregate in off-line spaces due to geographical, linguistic, or other logistical limitations. In her chapter on Latina responses to Jennifer Lopez, Molina-Guzmán conducts a discourse analysis addressing how online audiences, reacting to Lopez's star image, construct notions of an online self and attempt to self-represent in the process. Rooted in this scholarship, I assert that internet forums have a potential to mediate hegemonic U.S. ethnoracial discourses as well as provide a space for those invested in certain identity politics to feel a sense of agency. Therefore, this chapter is informed by the following research questions: How are Dominicans/Dominican-Americans broadly utilizing the internet as a medium of ideological exchange? More specifically, which media texts emerge as catalysts for such exchanges among geographical and digital Dominican communities? What ethnoracial, cultural, and political economic discourses are being expressed within these spaces?

And, which websites fit the distinction of an "alternative ideological space" through a prioritizing of *dominicanidad?*

In order to investigate the role of digital communities in the negotiation of *dominicanidad,* in this chapter I discuss the following websites: ThatsDominican.com, ESENDOM.com, and DR1.com. Chosen from those discussed during my fieldwork interviews and my own online searches, each of these three websites demonstrated a high level of audience engagement and developed community networks. These online spaces, those I contend are also potential "alternative ideological spaces," provide forums for community building, identity negotiation, and articulation of voices that are ignored in more mainstream venues. While each website has its own focus and expectations for its content, all three engage directly with audiences in a way that is informed by and subsequently informs negotiations of *dominicanidad*. ThatsDominican.com focuses on a wide array of cultural and social topics within the Dominican experience in the U.S. through a comedic framework. However, ESENDOM.com has a more serious tone that is heavily geared towards Dominican cultural expression (both offline and online) and has a New York City-centric bent. Finally, DR1.com is mostly structured around participant generated discussion forums concerned with the transnational realities of returning to or establishing new roots within the Dominican Republic for those who have recently moved from, or soon plan to move from, the U.S. As part of this study, I conducted interviews with the creators of

two of the three websites (ThatsDominican.com's Manuel "Minus P" Pimentel and ESENDOM.com's Nelson Santana) and use these to inform my analysis of the creation of online content for the expression of *dominicanidad* diasporically. Additionally, I conduct textual and rhetorical analyses based on my observation of the websites over a period of nearly two years and root my interpretations within my fieldwork findings. While each of these three websites have different goals and different approaches concerning the representation of *dominicanidad*, they all are spaces in which Dominican/Dominican-American identity is contested, re-affirmed, and re-articulated.

ONLINE CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDY: A COMBINATION OF THE "REAL" AND THE "DIGITAL"

While a study like this has yet to be undertaken focusing on this specific community/group (Dominicans/Dominican-Americans), Alex Campbell's (2006) scholarship on skinhead online communities takes a similar approach and serves as a model for the online audience study conducted for this chapter. Building off Judith Butler's notion of performativity, Campbell argues "While we do not come to cyberspace as 'nothings' who construct self-fashioned, post-modern identities, neither do we come to the net as fully constituted beings, stable loci from which acts follow" (274). Rooted in online participants' subjectivity in their offline lives—which are beholden to various degrees of normative or non-normative, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, and/or negotiated and resistant constructions—the self-making process

required for internet interaction and community building emerges from the conceptualization of self that audiences have fostered in their "real" lives. The ways in which individuals translate their everyday subjectivities when they go online retain a sense of obligatory located-ness—being connected to a location or space, whether this be geographical, imaginary, or abstract. According to Campbell, the internet is therefore not necessarily a tool but an "electronic geography" in which users who identify with each other congregate to form digital communities.

Furthermore, these online communities are no less significant or meaningful to their members than those that are based in an offline locality. The self-identified skinheads in Campbell's study used the internet to construct a forum that was complex and multi-layered. The way the community operated was very similar to the ways we understand traditional communities to interact where "Collectively, interactions, which constituted the skinhead newsgroup, engendered a feeling of community. Long-standing members formed meaningful friendly and adversarial relationships with others, and this provided a social and historical context which grounded the field" (Campbell 2006: 278). Through their interactions within the discursive terrain of cyberspace, the "skins" community collectively formed relationships, established behavioral norms, and cultivated a common "authentic" cultural identification. Physically the community members were dispersed across the world, but they nevertheless constituted an active community of shared identification with skinhead identity, history, and culture.

Of course, Campbell's study on skinheads is not the only lens through which we can understand self-making within cyberspace. Manuel Castells (1997) addressed the notion of self-making in our emerging "information society" by emphasizing the importance of computer-mediated communication in the formation of virtual communities. As "New information technologies are integrating the world in global networks of instrumentality," expression of identity and a desire to both share and connect with those with whom one might identify have become central functions of the internet (Castells 1997: 22). Because the internet is both part of our society and apart from our society, how the "self" is articulated online is influenced by and influences non-virtual subjectivities. Through the transition to the virtual self from the real-world self what is exposed are the ways in which ideologies constitute the self-making process and identity negotiation. The way identity is represented, negotiated, and constituted among Dominicans/Dominican-Americans online is interwoven with lived subjectivities in the "real" world. Just as *dominicanidad* is individual and relational in the lived experiences of Dominicans/Dominican-Americans, so too is the articulation of it in cyberspace.

Through building on critical cultural studies and reception studies literature, this chapter is able to make the following claims: (1) an investigation into media consumption practices that constitute everyday realities will reveal wider practices of both identity and reading negotiations, (2) the notion of "location," (in terms of "the

field," "the local/global," or space/place) is constantly shifting and has been historically misunderstood, and (3) while media are irrefutably hegemonic, individual people can and do negotiate with mediated texts in significant and politically meaningful ways. A focus on diasporic identity negotiation will reveal how the conceptualization of one's location is a complex process that involves a mediated reality. As a group that straddles the hyphen, Dominican-American sense of self is more appropriately constituted within a fluid notion of cultural *space* than a geographically anchored connection to *place*.

Audience Reception Studies

The multi-methodological approach utilized within this scholarship is ultimately concerned with revealing a more nuanced relationship between audiences and the online texts they engage with. In her chapter "Violence, Horror, and Sexually Explicit Images" in *Audience Reception Studies*, Janet Staiger (2005) insists that textual analysis alone cannot explain why people consume such content as it cannot reveal what the spectator is actually seeing or how they are interpreting what they see. Framing the relationship of marginalized groups' with media as negotiated and context driven, Staiger problematizes and analyzes assumptions regarding certain groups' relationship with media texts, for example gay men who have historically not seen direct representations of their identity or African Americans who continue to consume media that represents them in ways that are symbolically violent (to use Hall's term, not

Staiger's). Therefore, Staiger's critique of the limits of textual studies pairs well with David Morley's work in *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (1992). Morley works to problematize the notion of the audience and re-directs researcher focus to looking at the grounded meaning-making processes that are both shaped by and shape audiences. He takes on psychoanalysis and reception studies which deem to speak for an audience that they never directly interact with, and instead tries to reconcile his approaches to ethnography with those of anthropologists, primarily Clifford Geertz.

Citing Morley as making a critical intervention in cultural studies by suggesting that text-centric approaches are inadequate for determining what is really occurring among audiences, in *Living Room Wars* Ian Ang (1996) calls for a "critical" approach to audience studies, one informed by (British) critical cultural studies and rooted in analysis of ideology. Through understanding Dominican internet usage as a means to engage with a Dominican imaginary that is constituted within cyberspace(s), more than Dominican-American reception related behavior can be investigated, but an opportunity to delve into their meaning-making processes can be accessed.

Imaginary Space: Rethinking the Notions of "Place" and "Space"

As trailblazers in constructing approaches to both ethnography of the internet—research that centers the cultural function of the internet—and internet-based ethnography—a method of doing ethnography online, but not necessarily concerned

with the internet as a cultural phenomenon—Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2003) argue that the internet is a "localized global phenomenon" which has reinforced local identities by creating an awareness of one's position vis-à-vis the rest of the world, providing for the development of more specifically place-centric identity. For example, for the participants of Trinidadian origin involved in their own internet study, the internet operated as a space in which they could negotiate and engage with their Trinidadian-ness in ways that were more reflective of notions of the local than the global. Miller and Slater insist that paying detailed attention to offline references and the offline world, as well as the often fluid distinctions between online and offline lives, is an important venture. Therefore, notions that the online world is a completely separate place and one devoid of context is not only incorrect but ignores the reality that "there is a recognition of the complex and nuanced relationship between online and offline worlds which produces the normative structures of both of these worlds" (Miller & Slater 2003: 53). Furthermore, Miller and Slater suggest that an internet space, even when its participants are physically located all over the world, can still be considered a traditional single-sited field of study. I would like to extend this even further. While they do not make this claim, it can be reasoned that if an internet space can be conceptualized as a single field site, then one can also include the actual physical places of its participants as part of the same locality. So, for those in diasporic contexts, they can still conceive of themselves and be conceived of as belonging to a location, or

what might be understood as a diasporic imaginary, that they do not physically inhabit due to the positioning of the internet space within or vis-à-vis that locality. In other words, a reality is created that fuses the mediascape with the ethnoscape in a re-articulation of community and belonging (Appadurai 1996).

To take a quick step back, I would like to first disentangle the often conflated concepts of "space" and "place." When looking at culture and the realms that it inhabits, both space and place come into play. Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) deconstruct these concepts in a manner that is rooted in the reality of ethnographic fieldwork. As they suggest, the notion of place has been understood as connected to location in a very physical way. Yet as the world becomes more interconnected, the reterritorialization of space leads to re-conceptualizing politics of community, solidarity, identity, and cultural difference. They contend that "we can see that the identity of a place emerges by the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organized spaces with its cultural construction as a community or locality" (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 8). However, in our modern post-colonial, diasporic, and globalized world, rapid mobility and lack of territorial roots lead to erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places. Consequently, as actuality of place/locality becomes increasingly blurred, ideas of space become more salient. This reality connects Benedict Anderson's (1983) "imagined communities" to what Gupta and Ferguson refer to as "imagined spaces." As remembered places become symbolic

anchors for dispersed peoples, “space itself becomes a kind of neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization is inscribed” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 7). Therefore, Dominicans in the U.S. are able to experience a conflicted association with place while simultaneously sustaining a strong connection to space.

Instead of connecting to a geographical location, Dominicans in the U.S. root themselves within a Dominican imaginary. Juan Flores (2000), reflecting on the experiences of Latina/os in the U.S. as both simultaneously separate and similar, contends that Latino subjectivities do not necessarily draw from a shared place of origin but from a shared imaginary. Using a framework that builds on Adjurn Appadurai’s articulation of various “scapes” and Anderson’s (1983) notion of “imagined communities,” Flores posits,

> The ‘imaginary’ in this sense does not signify the ‘not real,’ some make-believe realm oblivious to the facts, but a projection beyond the ‘real’ as the immediately present and rationally discernable. It is the ‘community’ represented ‘for itself,’ a unity fashioned creatively on the basis of shared memory and desire, congruent histories of misery and struggle, and intertwining utopias (198).

Therefore, while Latina/os emphasize their intra-group differences, this is not to provide internal division but is intended to be a means of expressing their agency in identifying and grounding themselves within a historical reality. Flores posits that Latino memory/desire/imaginary is not just reactive but an alternative ethnos created in its own right and for its own ends. Specifically, “Latino identity is imagined not as the

negation of the non-Latino, but as the affirmation of cultural and social realities, myths and possibilities, as they are inscribed in their own human trajectory" (200).

For Dominicans in the U.S. (as well as those in countless other countries around the globe), internet forums become spaces where they can engage in a sense of belonging that is traditionally thought of only through geographical/national frameworks. Online Dominican forums become an imaginary: a space in which those who feel a sense of shared community come to interact and re-affirm their *dominicanidad*. Internet media platforms produce an ideal entrée into an investigation of Dominicans/Dominican-Americans as audiences that engage with various media texts through their attempts to connect to a Dominican imaginary. By examining the ways in which Dominicans/Dominican-Americans tap into this imaginary discursively within cyberspace, both the cultural contextualization my scholarship facilitates and the audience reception trends that can be documented via online research construct a more complex picture concerning how *dominicanidad* becomes mediated.

Alternative Ideological Spaces and Online Discursive Struggle

Returning to Molina-Guzmán's (2010) notion of "alternative ideological spaces," and building on the internet scholarship reviewed in this chapter, I focus on the function of cyberspace as a terrain of ideological struggle. After establishing the legitimacy and complex nature of online communities, what I am ultimately looking to provide here is

an analysis of how alternative and counter-hegemonic discourses emerge and gain traction within online communities forged by Dominicans in the U.S. This section puts the scholarship of Molina-Guzmán and Herman Gray (2005) in dialogue within a framework of hegemony as conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci.

As has been long suggested—and as documented by scholars such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994), Herman Gray (2005), Beretta E. Smith-Shomade (2008), and Christine Acham (2012)—minority group access to mass media production and inclusion is limited. Their stories ignored, cultures stereotyped, and creative expression undervalued, mainstream media has historically failed to accommodate marginalized groups. And while there have most certainly been attempts to be more inclusive, industrial practices have time and again prioritized a supposedly more lucrative "white mainstream audience." Relegated to cable and independent forms of media production, marginalized groups rarely receive a level of inclusion that even begins to reflect their numbers. Furthermore, new media spaces, heralded as ushering in a new era of media inclusivity, have not been able to satisfy the gap of representation produced by more traditional media (TV, film, etc.). However, there is no doubt that new media forms, the internet in particular, have opened up a space for under-represented groups to express their voices. Through technological developments that make it cheaper and easier to create media content, to a distribution system that merely requires one to have a YouTube account, to the audience building potential

sustained through sharing content over social media, it is clear that innovative and diverse production and participation is appearing within new media. Yet at the same time, the success of and access to new media has not ushered in the social and industrial paradigm shift that translates into capital across media platforms.

Herman Gray (2005), drawing on the theorizations of Stuart Hall and Cornel West, offers the following questions of cyberspace: "In cyberspace and the new communications media and technology that structure it, can difference function as the basis for the production of counterhegemonic cultural representations and formations that link critiques of the existing order with new imaginative possibilities for a very different order?" (146). Molina-Guzman, borrowing heavily from Gramscian notions of counterhegemonic ideologies, would respond to Gray by pointing out that while there are most certainly reproductions of hegemonic ideologies and structures within cyberspace, there are also spaces opened up to construct "alternative ideological spaces"; spaces that lead to critical ruptures in the fabric of hegemonic ideology. Put another way, it is not that the internet creates a digital democratic utopia, it is that it contains spaces in which the voices of the unheard, the non-normative identities of Others, and counterhegemonic negotiations can find a forum.

While she does not cite him, Molina-Guzmán (2010) roots her articulation of "alternative ideological spaces" within Gramscian conceptualizations of the workings of hegemony and the functions of ideology. Ideologies, whether hegemonic or alternative,

manifest in all social realms and unite "the masses," or what Gramsci refers to as "social blocs." Furthermore, even hegemonic ideologies are not fixed but are constantly being resisted by social blocs that sustain and promote alternative ideologies. Ideologies, in this framework, must be understood within historically significant contexts. Gramsci (2012 [1971]) insists "Mass adhesion or non-adhesion to an ideology is the real critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking" (245). Alternative ways of thinking take part in hegemonic discursive struggle not based on an arbitrary shift or difference in point of view but through the competing historically situated processes of adhesion or non-adhesion. Put another way, ideologies are hegemonic due to the sociohistorical conditions that lead to their construction, and, subsequently, counter-hegemonic and alternative ideologies are produced through reciprocal sociohistorical conditions. This could easily be applied to the struggle between dominant and alternative ideologies, as the conditions in which Gramsci understood hegemonic struggle—that is in the Marxist sense of the ruling class versus the masses—have evolved. Dominicans in the U.S. position *dominicanidad* as an alternative ideology to both White/Black racial binaries as well as discourses of pan-*latinidad*.

The changing of the ideological guard is rooted in discursive terrains, and in our current sociohistorical moment it is through media that old ideologies "dissolve" and new ideologies emerge. This is where the work of Gray (2005) points to how ideologies become negotiated through media and specifically new media. He argues, "These new

technologies—in the form of the Internet, digital storage, retrieval, and network—are now, perhaps more than ever, the predominant places of mediation, transformation, and translation of vernacular and everyday practices into commercial forms" (Gray 2005: 136). New media do not merely usher in technological innovation but also unveil the role of politics and history in their development. Internet spaces offer a "promise for potential," a potential for establishing and mobilizing marginalized communities into "critical networks of opposition" (Gray 2005: 141). While he is not convinced that this is/will be the case, Gray does recognize that new media offers the potential for spaces of ideological rupture, or the "alternative ideological spaces" referred to by Molina-Guzmán.

More convinced of the growing impact of new media spaces than Gray, Molina-Guzmán (2010), in her comprehensive scholarship of Latina representation and *latinidad*, dissects audience interpretations and responses to several Latina celebrity case studies through the framework of what she describes as symbolic rupture. Exploring audience sense-making in relation to Latina subjectivity within online discussions and blogs, Molina-Guzmán investigates "how audiences negotiate uncomfortable transformations in the social and cultural terrain surrounding U.S. national identity, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality" (10). Essentially, through online audience reception studies, researchers can identify how those moments of ideological rupture empower audiences to confront ideologies that marginalize them. This chapter

uses Molina-Guzmán's scholarship as a model in its production and interpretation of an online audience study. Where Molina-Guzmán sees spaces of ideological rupture, I contend that these ruptures work to destabilize ethnoracial ideologies both online and offline through expression of uniquely hybrid identities of Dominicans in the U.S.

Molina-Guzmán (2010) structures her scholarship through a framework of comparative media studies that highlights a handful of case studies; she analyzes blogs, websites, discussion boards, and letters to the editor and investigates mediated audience reception of the Latina body as positioned to expose hegemonic U.S. ethnoracial ideology. Whether it be Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek in *Frida* (dir. Julie Taymor, 2002), or the characters of *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010), Molina-Guzmán stresses the importance of not merely relying on textual or critical analyses but instead to include audiences within the research equation. Looking for the various media sites in which audience reception can be found, the nuances of audience and online negotiations of *latinidad* can be uncovered.

For instance, Molina-Guzmán analyzes audience reception to actress Salma Hayek and the film *Frida* by investigating both online discussion forums (IMDB.com in particular) and commentary that appeared in Mexican newspapers to reveal how audiences were grappling with the film's construction of Mexican and Latina identity. In this instance, "audience discussions about Salma Hayek and *Frida* demonstrate the problematic nature of globally commodified media representations of gendered

Latinidad and the limits of symbolic colonization by highlighting alternative constructions of ethnic and racial Latina/o identity" (Molina-Guzmán 2010: 19). What she is gesturing towards is the existence of multiple possible negotiations of the related discourses and how essential it is to recognize that some of these negotiations might reinforce the symbolic colonization of *latinidad* while others might contest it. Molina-Guzmán, Gray, and Gramsci all point to the reality that alternative ideological discourses are undeniably out there. These alternative ideological discourses need a space to be expressed, shared, and negotiated, and I contend that new media play a significant role in the negotiation of hegemonic discourses and ideologies for Dominican-Americans and other Latina/os as substantiated by my own research.

DOMINICAN INTERNET COMMUNITIES: SPACE, COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY

Diasporic Dominicans have a uniquely circular migration pattern, one that is stabilized through connections between each position of the migratory map. Moreover, these connections are constituted through active communication networks with family and friends that include heavy media usage. This investigation of Dominican-centric online spaces helps elucidate how Dominican/Dominican-American media usage in the U.S. is engaging with the active communication and discourse networks that are so critical to the stability of this diasporic reality. Internet technologies are a crucial factor in Dominican-American cultural alignment and become indispensable in a reality where

one's family, friends, and other social ties are geographically dispersed. Of particular utility among Dominicans in the U.S., social media serve as a salient platform for frequent and meaningful engagement with a Dominican imaginary.

Every person I interviewed during my fieldwork in New York City discussed that they used new media—whether that be email, Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Tumblr, Instagram, Skype, or interactive discussion or chat forums—in myriad ways. Facebook in particular was cited as instrumental in maintaining a connection to Dominican culture. Ana[39] me that "without Facebook I would not feel as connected" to her family and friends in the Dominican Republic or her Dominican heritage. Staying in touch with those left behind in the Dominican Republic was mentioned as the primary use of these new media, but there was also a desire among many to find and connect with others in the diaspora who wanted to express and celebrate their Dominican heritage. Several times people mentioned to me the importance of social media in helping them navigate a sense of Dominican community centralized in New York City. What this suggests is that online resources provided an opportunity to indulge in aspects of *dominicanidad* offline, bridging the abstract connection to a Dominican imaginary with a location within New York City where Dominican culture was being embraced and shared. Transferred from the imaginary onto the geographical spaces of the city, *dominicanidad* could be translated into neighborhood affiliation and pride. Tina, when discussing her activity on

[39] Interview conducted on June 18, 2013 with DR-born woman in her early twenties.

Twitter, told me "I go there to see what events are happening in the Bronx. That's how I discovered Adam Levine Perez and his project Bronx series. These episodes are great because they spark new conversations. I like to follow these types of media, mostly because they are outside of the mainstream and are self-produced and show local pride." As is the case with ESENDOM.com in particular, online spaces spill over into offline places through the lived experiences of U.S. Dominicans. Communities forged online but fostered offline blur the boundaries between the virtual and the real, which reinforces the significance of the internet in the Dominican-American experience.

Social media activity and participation directly feeds into the pursuit of salient online content and fosters the formation of digital communities. Of particular note, it is often the circulation of online videos that entice Dominicans/Dominican-Americans to many of the websites, which subsequently serve as hubs of online community building through a quest to discover and articulate *dominicanidad*. Whether it be a viral video shared over email, a personal tumblr account, or re-posts on Facebook of notable stories relevant to diasporic Dominicans, communication networks sustained through the sharing of media labor to directly engage Dominicans living in the U.S. with evolving negotiations of *dominicanidad*.

By combining qualitative interviews, cultural study, and online audience reception methodologies I am able to investigate the role(s) of online spaces in the (re)articulation of *dominicanidad* and point towards those discourses that are striving to

contest dominant ethnoracial ideologies. Specifically, *dominicanidad* becomes articulated through departures from dominant paradigms of identification that would place Dominicans in the U.S. within racial binaries and/or the homogenizing umbrella of pan-*latinidad*. Instead of acculturating to U.S. hegemonic identity discourses, *dominicanidad* is expressed through an emphasis on nationality or national heritage. While not ignoring or completely rejecting more normalized paradigms of identity, Dominicans in the U.S. use online spaces to reconcile the nature of their *dominicanidad* in their everyday lives against a discursive backdrop that privileges assimilation over heritage retention. Furthermore, these arbitrations of *dominicanidad* are conducted in a shared linguistic background. Frequent use of Dominican vernacular Spanish and its various hybrid combinations with English are the lingua franca for these negotiations. Linguistic code-switching is the norm, and seemingly necessary in a reality where identity is informed by the styles through which one linguistically expresses. The language-centric approach to the nature of *dominicanidad* stems from the influence of sustaining hyphenated and hybridized identities. Much more than a struggle to sustain a sense of self through a dichotomy of being both "here" and "there," by tapping into their connection to the Dominican imaginary Dominicans in the U.S. are able to equally position themselves in both simultaneously.

This section looks at three Dominican-centric websites—ThatsDominican.com, ESENDOM.com, and DR1.com—as representatives of the ways in which *dominicanidad*

is being negotiated, expressed, and engaged with within cyberspace. What is most telling about the comparison of the three sites is that each articulate *dominicanidad* differently. Whether it be the difference in audience (class and generation seem to be particularly influential), the tone of the content, the topics highlighted, or the design of the websites themselves, each website constructs a unique virtual community. There are, of course, overlaps in how each define *dominicanidad*, but what it means to be Dominican, and more specifically a Dominican member of online communities, plays out in nuanced ways across cyberspace. As a critical cultural study, this chapter uses immersion in online communities, interviews with online media producers, and interviews conducted in the physical field to paint an image of the cultural landscape within which these websites emerge and which they help construct. The fieldwork component contextualizes my investigation of online participants' comments and discussions, critical and textual analysis of online content, and brief industrial discussion of each of the three websites focused on here. After a review of the literature delving into the democratic potential of the internet, I will posit that online spaces not only allow for an outlet of self-expression for those who are frequently ignored by more mainstream media, but that within these digital spaces marginalized groups are finding agency and asserting alternative paradigms for identity negotiation that have the potential to influence U.S. ideologies of identity more broadly.

Webtopia?: The Limits of the Internet as a Digital Demographic Space

Too often conceptualized as a vast void lacking boundaries or structure, the internet, and the digital space that constitutes it, is no more the black hole of contemporary culture as were the "old" media that came before it. Furthermore, the internet can be understood as a cultural space, which has similar social, political, and economic exchanges and processes to what is considered "real life." As Castells (1997) argues, "interactive computer networks are growing exponentially, creating new forms and channels of communication, shaping life and being shaped by life at the same time" (2). The internet does not operate in a vacuum, instead it is built on and subsequently influences, interacts, and engages with the tangible social realm. Similar to the traditional Dominican social clubs established in New York City at the beginning of the mass Dominican immigration to the U.S., cyberspace is a space within which voice is constituted, agency is wielded, and ideology is negotiated. As I will discuss shortly, the digital space opened up through internet participation and consumption has provided an opportunity for marginalized groups, communities, and identities to express and be heard in ways that might have not been possible in more traditional media. Morely (2009) reflects on the scholarship of new media development, suggesting that "In this context, critical work on the virtual realm has also begun to recognize that cyberspace itself has a perfectly identifiable geography," albeit a geography that is imagined and abstract (115). As a group that builds their sense of self and community against

traditional ideas of geography, suspended between two separate geographical locations yet positioning themselves in both, Dominican-Americans have carved out a *space* for themselves online while maintaining an ambivalent connection to *place*

With the notion of "place" now destabilized, space becomes an arena of discourse and forums for discursive exchange. For example, Patrick Weber (2013) looks towards the transition of news dissemination from old media platforms to the internet and how this has encouraged increased engagement among media consumers. He argues "Online mass media such as news websites are particularly important forums in the public sphere because they have the ability to communicate collectively relevant issues to large audiences and to facilitate the formation of public opinion" (Weber 2013: 942). Therefore, cyberspace is seen as providing for the *opportunity* for more democratic media participation. While this might be more true in theory than in practice, for Weber, the effectiveness of deliberate digital democracy is heavily influenced by the style and structure of each website, where "potential only emerges when a number of users participate in commenting and when users repeatedly post comments to the point at which communication in the article's comments section becomes interactive" (952). It is the potential for interaction that provides the opportunity for democratic engagement. However, potential does not guarantee reality, and the level of engagement must be studied on a website by website basis.

Given that the democratic potential of the space in "cyberspace" is a highly contested idea, it is more fruitful to examine how the notion of "voice" operates within the discursive realm of cyberspace. To return to Shohat and Stam's (1994) notion of identities in relation, they constitute voice through the ways in which media rely on "focalization" to speak from, through, and to various positionalities. They emphasize the importance for researchers to take into account questions of address when they analyze representation: "Who is speaking through a film? Who is imagined as listening? Who is actually listening? Who is looking? And what social desires are mobilized by the film?" (Shohat & Stam 1994: 205). Put another way, whose voice is being expressed and with which audiences does this voice resonate? Voice is a phenomenon of discourse as an arena of interaction, and nowhere is voice so literal, visual, and explicit than in online spaces. As Amanda Mitra and Eric Watts (2002) contend, the key to conceptualizing (cyber)space is understanding that it is composed of discourses. For them, it is the concept of "voice" that is useful in examining the social significance and impact of the internet in contemporary society. They argue "the importance of the metaphor of the voice becomes vibrant in the case of the internet, because unlike the centralized organization of the traditional media industries, the internet offers individuals, who never possessed any cultural capital or a geographic space, a discursive space" (Mitra & Watts: 2002: 491). As opposed to passive audiences that merely consume media—even those that on an individual level negotiate or reject the encoded messages—digital

audiences are active, interactive, and contributive. The most current incarnations of new media allow even higher levels of engagement—through comment forums, chat programs, and instant feedback—in addition to a significantly higher level of user generated content. Therefore, as Mitra and Watts suggest, expression of voice online is available in a way unseen in other media because "within the hyperlinked discursive space created by the internet, the marginal is difficult to define because it is impossible to locate the center" (487). Put another way, those voices that are marginalized in the real/offline world have the opportunity to be expressed and heard where they might otherwise be silenced or ignored. Dominican/Dominican-American voices might be absent within film and television, but they are not silenced or invisible online. While it has not yet brought the revolution Mitra and Watts had hoped it might, widespread internet use has provided a productive function in the lives of marginalized groups and cultivated pockets of ideological rupture.

All of this scholarship points towards *potential*; it suggests that cyberspace *could* be a terrain in which marginalized voices could form digital communities and instigate more widespread media inclusion and shifts in hegemonic ethnoracial paradigms. The existence of digital communities, facilitated by the interconnected nature of the internet, operates through discursive frameworks that work to uphold, negotiate, and contest ideologies in real time. Yet these communities are not rooted in a shared location but a shared position. This shared position, which is often a mere Google

search away, is a mediated one; it is forged through cyberspace, often in conjunction with other facets of media culture and therefore could be easily dismissed as trivial or shallow. But for many of the individuals that participate in some of these internet communities, they are far from superficial. Mediated or not, discursive struggles play out within digital communities online, and these struggles have real world implications. The three websites included in this chapter's survey illustrate how this potential is being utilized, and how online communities thrive and empower themselves in ways unheard of before widespread internet use.

ThatsDominican.com

A website mentioned in many of my interviews, ThatsDominican.com strives to create humorous content regarding the Dominican experience in the U.S. Much like other lampoon sites, FunnyOrDie.com for example, ThatsDominican produces short videos that are meant to come across as silly, funny, and ridiculous from an in-group perspective. However, unlike sites like FunnyOrDie (a side project for mainstream comedy star Will Ferrell), ThatsDominican does not have a large budget or access to well-trained or seasoned production teams. The result is a collection of short videos that frequently include the website's creator, Manuel Pimentel, and a handful of his friends satirizing and playfully expressing their experience with Dominican culture. During my interview with Pimentel, he described the site as forum consisting of

"comedy skits explaining the peculiarities of the Dominican people, in a clean fun way for the whole family to enjoy."[40] The website itself is mainly devoted to sharing and anchoring the videos it produces, which are all YouTube supported and can also be found on ThatsDominican's YouTube channel. Beginning with content that humorously engaged with the Dominican experience in the U.S. more broadly, over the years ThatsDominican's videos have focused on many topics including, but not limited to: family, music, sports (baseball in particular), living in New York, family on the island, Dominican slang, and comparisons to other groups in the U.S. More observation based on Pimentel's experience than social commentary, the videos have nevertheless struck a chord (and sometimes a nerve) among Dominicans on a diasporic level.

Figure 3.1:ThatsDominincan.com's hompage

[40] Interview conducted by me with ThatsDominican.com creator and producer Manuel Pimentel in December, 2014.

While not universally popular among Dominicans/Dominican-Americans I interviewed in New York City—Dania in particular expressed concern that mainstream audiences exposed to the videos would think "all Dominicans are like this, it is not a very good representation of Dominicans"—it cultivates a respectably large audience that finds humor in the website's videos and often comments on them. Its YouTube channel, which was created March 27, 2011, has to date 131,430 subscribers and 12,146,904 views. Clearly, ThatsDominican has caught the attention of Dominicans both in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic (as well as those spread out in the numerous sites within the Dominican diaspora).

A particularly representative example of the types of videos ThatsDominican produces, a six-minute piece entitled "*El problema con el Hombre Dominicano*!" [The Problem with the Dominican Man] that was posted in December of 2011 epitomizes the website's brand of humor and approach to engaging with *dominicanidad* in the U.S. The video stars Pimentel, who has edited footage of his commentary as himself with various dramatizations of him playing scenes of what he interprets as some of the problems women encounter when dating Dominican men. Donning a series of wigs in a handful of makeshift sets, Pimentel plays exaggerated representations of those things he has experienced Dominican men do when interacting with women (see Figures 3.2-3.4). The examples include: being overly sentimental at the loss of a girlfriend, being too egotistical and focused on pride in their masculine sexual prowess (a reference to the

particular brand of Dominican machismo), asking too many demanding questions and bossing women around, waxing poetic to defend their actions, and demanding attention towards their muscles and masculine strength. At the end of the video Pimentel tells his audience "*son todos hombres dominicanos son asi, claro que no*" [Are all Dominican men like this, of course not], but his characterizations are rooted in his own experience. Following the video are 123 individual comments to date, most of which are in agreement with the content and have found it very funny. One woman posting "*es la pura verdad.... el hombre dominicano es muy orgulloso* [it is the pure truth…the Dominican man is very prideful], im [sic] dominican and i knew it since i was little that a Dominican MAN was not for me." For this video, and all the others I surveyed, the most common comment was simply "*es veridad! jajaja*" [it's true! Hahaha].

Figure 3.2: The Dominican *Machista*

Figure 3.3: The Broken-Hearted Man

Figure 3.4: The *Hombre Fuerte*

I asked ThatsDominican's creator Pimental, a Dominican-born U.S. citizen who somewhat reluctantly identified himself as Dominican-American, what lead to the creation of the website. He told me:

> ThatsDominican started simply out of my own need to retain my roots, I would look up certain things that I remembered from growing up in the Dominican Republic and found some of it very difficult to find. Since I was already looking up this information, I figured I could put it all in one website for people who felt like me, ThatsDominican.com, aimed at Dominicans living outside of the Republic who missed their roots. With time, I started yearning for more original content, not just reporting on news other sites did, but my own take on it... I bought a camera to conduct my own interviews of Dominican celebrities that I cared

> about, and with that same camera made my first comedy video "El ser Dominicano", explaining what it is to be Dominican... It blew up faster than any of my other works, so I took it as a sign and kept doing new videos on different subjects most dealing with Dominican culture (Pimental 2014: personal correspondence).

Pimental recognized a void on the internet, one to which he was inspired to personally respond. There is a reason ThatsDominican is successful; Dominicans in the U.S. are starving for spaces where they can indulge in their Dominican heritage.

Based on its own self-reporting, ThatsDominican's audience is predominantly male and trends towards the 15-24 age demographic. With the majority of their views coming from the Dominican Republic, which is something Pimental appreciates, he is "really more about the people outside of the Dominican Republic that look up [his] show, and use it as it was intended, to connect or re-connect to their roots" (Pimental 2014: personal correspondence). At the same time, it is clear from the audience feedback that ThatsDominican's content is a tool for sharing *dominicanidad* across the diaspora. After a video on Dominican mothers, one poster comments "*vivo en Rusia, pero soy Dominicano. estos videos me recuerdan mi país*" [I live in Russia, but I am Dominican. These videos remind me of my country/home]. Following a video distinguishing the differences between Dominicans in New York and those in the Dominican Republic, another comment was left that demonstrates the extent of the Dominican diaspora: "You should do 'vs Miami Dominicans'..we're a different breed from Dominican Yorks!! lol XD."

Many of the comments left for ThatsDominican's videos use various techniques for expression that has become the norm in text-driven forums. Through capitalizing letters, the use of emoticons, and internet abbreviations and shorthand (for example LOL or *jajaja*) posters are able to inflect their posts and further substantiate their comments for the video and those directed at other posts/posters. Campbell found similar posting practices in his study of online skinhead communities and contends, "These modes constructed and communicated versions of the 'self,' and they were read and interpreted by others as style and dress might be read offline" (Campbell 2006: 278). In one of the comments mentioned above, the poster used the emoticon "XD" which is supposed to represent a person sticking their tongue out, yet usually in a playful manner. Such additions to the plain text reveal some of the personality of the poster and convey more meaning than a mere sentence is able to do.

Figure 3.5:ThatsDominican.com merchandising on their website

Whether it occurs through liking the YouTube channel, purchasing its merchandise (see Figure 3.5), or sharing comments, ThatsDominican has a particularly active audience. Of the website's audience, Pimental says "in any given video you may get 400 comments just pure feedback, and while an average of 95% or more of the feedback is usually positive, you do get the small percentage that finds something wrong in everything anyone does" (personal correspondence). Whether the comments are "positive" or "negative" is almost a nonissue; what is important about the audience engagement with ThatsDominican is that it opens up a space where *dominicanidad* can

be discussed, re-affirmed, and contested. In the very claim that the name "ThatsDominican" makes, its audience is encouraged to question what it is exactly that is "Dominican" and what is not. ThatsDominican invites its audience to negotiate the meaning of *dominicanidad*, and through the exchanges found following the videos a virtual community is forged by those who strive to articulate what make them Dominican. As one poster proclaims, "*Los dominicanos somos unicos*" [We Dominicans are unique], ThatsDominican's content is able to pinpoint and represent a sensibility that is identifiable to its audience and rooted in larger discussions of *dominicanidad*.

The website and the videos ThatsDominican produces are predominantly in Spanish, which suggests that their audience would be mostly bilingual or Spanish-speaking. Furthermore, the type of Spanish used aligns with the variant that is spoken in New York City—drawing influences from Caribbean dialectical Spanish, various incarnations of Spanglish, and often aspects of African-American vernacular English. This trend can be seen in both the content produced by ThatsDominican and in the comments that appear in response to their videos. Most of these comments are written in Dominican Spanish, Dominican Spanglish, African-American vernacular English, standard American English, or a mixture of these. Characteristic of both hybrid identity and cultural retention, contributors to ThatsDominican's online community engage with the website in cross-media (through video-sharing and multi-sited media platforms), cross-cultural (those who identify as Dominican, Dominican-American, American, and

those who transition between them), and cross-national fashions (their videos have reached individuals from the Dominican Republic, the U.S., and the far reaches of the diaspora). The use of language might be the most overt example of the ways ThatsDominican plays with *dominicanidad*, but it is certainly not the only way.

When asked to define what it means to be Dominican, Pimental responded: "To be Dominican is a feeling, when you visit Dominican Republic things just click, it makes sense for all its quirkiness, you just feel like you belong…What is important to me about 'Dominican-ness' that I make sure to put in my video? I have to make sure I am talking about things I've seen, experienced, or hear about enough, so that I can maintain that truth to it" (personal correspondence). ThatsDominican's goal is positioned firmly in the intention to provide an outlet for *dominicanidad* to be expressed and celebrated on both individual and collective levels within the U.S. Pimental says the website wants for its audience to "just to be proud of who you are, to accept those differences that make us who we are…what we are is pretty amazing. I feel like every people should value what makes them stand out, while everyone is busy trying to fit in, forgetting their roots, that very same thing you run away from is what gives you power" (personal correspondence). Dominicans have their own unique immigration story, ways of speaking, cultural symbols, foodways, and customs that make their experience in the U.S. different from the plethora of immigrant groups (Latina/os included) that should be understood in relation to and not identical to. The website's goal is Dominican cultural

empowerment and cultural specificity in a country that would rather lump Dominicans/Dominican-Americans in the pan-ethnic Latino umbrella. Whether or not viewers agree with the website's approach to articulating *dominicanidad*, it, nonetheless, serves as an alternative ideological space that insists on acknowledging the distinctiveness of Dominican heritage and claims to identity. Seen most overtly in the discussion of the individual videos on YouTube, ThatsDominican has not only been able to capitalize on the nature of YouTube platform, but has also fostered an audience that utilizes the space in which this content is placed in order to engage with others to negotiate the meaning(s) and significance of *dominicanidad*. ThatsDominican's YouTube channel, therefore, circumvents traditional media structures altogether to fill a void for Dominican/Dominican-American audiences.

Placing ThatsDominican within a broader industrial context, new media technologies and platforms facilitates the role that ThatsDominican is able to fill for Dominican audiences and is a direction that many other under-represented and marginalized groups have taken up as well. Pointing out the lack of opportunity for Black media producers in particular, Christine Acham (2012) suggests that many have sought out alternative media avenues. There is a deficiency of Black produced content in mainstream media outlets, not because of a shortage of creativity and creation, but because of a lack of interest on the part of the mainstream media to showcase it. Regardless of the actual population demographics in the U.S., mainstream media

remains white dominant. However, on the internet "a completely different racial landscape is evident" (Acham 2012: 65). Contending this move to the internet empowers Black creative forces and fosters community building, Acham suggests "Webisode production has particular relevance for Black viewers as the sites that host Black-themed webisodes have become loci for segments of the Black community who not only identify with the stories but also connect with other viewers through the Internet sites" (63). Put another way, web television can challenge network narratives and work to create a sense of Black community. Online content thus is clearly filling a void and fostering virtual communities that can connect through consumption of Black-produced and Black-centric internet texts. Acham (2012), acknowledging the idealism of interpreting the internet as a bastion for the under-represented, questions whether what is being engendered in cyberspace is a "Black Webtopia," however. New media has provided a platform for Black talent, stories, and viewers to engage in salient media production. Yet, in the end Acham asks, "Will watching a webisode ever have the viewing potential of network television?" (73). Aymar Jean Christian (2010) proffers a response to Acham's question in his research on "indie web series." His research investigating the potential of alternative content distributed and accessed online gets to the crux of how industrial, cultural, social, and technological factors glean a new media reality for marginalized groups. Christian gestures towards the many vectors and

nuances that play a role in the circulation, production, and industrialization of new media texts.

Furthermore, online content production is not reserved for out-of-work or hopeful media industry creative talent. A significant portion of what can be found online is largely user-generated content. Heralding the internet as possessing the potential to "alter the media landscape for ethnic minorities," Maria Kopacz and Bessie Lee Lawton (2011) contend that user-generated content "websites like YouTube allow anyone to post material with minimal institutional gatekeeping. They therefore hold out the promise of an outlet for alternative depictions of minorities and places where marginalizing and stereotypical racial portrayals can be challenged and redefined" (331). Cyberspace environments that host user generated content become contexts of alternative portrayals because participation is easy and cheap. Furthermore, more broadly, YouTube has become immensely popular over the years and now accounts for nearly 10% of all traffic on the internet (Cheng et al. 2007: 7-8). In fact, since its emergence in 2005, it is one of the fastest-growing and accessed websites on the internet. Not only is YouTube exceedingly successful, "In addition to YouTube's vast popularity and openness to individual authors, the demographics of its users make it a likely context where alternative portrayals of marginalized ethnic groups can emerge" (Kopacz & Lawton 2011: 343). This diversity has many benefits; chief among them is the opportunity to foster positive in-group identification, self-representation, and

empowerment. What this points to again is the potential for the interactive and engaged nature of the internet as a medium to challenge dominant ideologies and cultivate spaces where marginalized communities can negotiate their own subjectivity—with the additional potential for contesting certain ethnoracial ideologies in the offline world.

ESENDOM.com

In a different vein from the lampoon style of ThatsDominican, ESENDOM.com—drawing its name from an abbreviation of *Esencia Dominicana* (Dominican Essence)—is primarily a celebration of Dominican culture, but one that is clearly marked by the realities of U.S. Dominican biculturalism and bilingualism. While some of those elements do appear in ThatsDominican, ESENDOM does so more explicitly. Furthermore, its content could be considered more reverent, serious, and even intellectual. However, the website operates more like a news source than a platform for distributing Dominican-centric online videos. Generally, ESENDOM operates as a source for coverage of current events concerning Dominicans diasporically and promoting upcoming cultural events (mostly those taking place in New York City). The site also includes various reviews of recent Dominican/Dominican-American cultural products such as music, films, and prominent academic and popular publications. Where ThatsDominican offers short narrative content that implicitly reflects *dominicanidad*,

ESENDOM serves as a reservoir of explicit documentation of the changing trends in Dominican culture in the U.S. and the Dominican diaspora more broadly.

Launched in 2009 by two undergraduate classmates, Nelson Santana and Emmanuel Espinal, the original inception of ESENDOM was meant to be a magazine targeting Dominicans living in the U.S. Much like the path that Pimental followed in his creation of ThatsDominican, ESENDOM was created to fill a void felt by two college undergraduates who wanted to report on stories, events, and cultural content that were being ignored by other media platforms. Santana told me:

> We believe there is a market and we wanted to bring together Dominicans and non-Dominicans alike through content: Dominican history, popular culture (music, arts, performance, etc.) sports, feature restaurants in DR and in the US, feature different places such as the different provinces, towns, etc. Overall, we wanted to promote the Dominican Republic, the Dominican people, bring them together, etc. Since we did not have the funds (and were actually rejected for a bank loan) we decided to create the Website instead, which was part of the original plan to complement the magazine (Santana 2015: personal correspondence).[41]

While they still have the desire to transition ESENDOM into a print magazine, like other similar attempts by marginalized groups to break into the mainstream media market, for now they find their home online. However, its incarnation as a website allows ESENDOM to provide audiovisual content, publish and update quickly, and foster a more engaged audience.

[41] Interview conducted with co-founder and co-chief editor Nelson Santana in January 2015.

Figure 3.6: ESENDOM.com's Mission Statement

Due to the structure of the website and the nature of its content, ESENDOM's audience consists mostly of New Yorkers who are interested and invested in the Dominican cultural experience within the U.S. Much of the website's focus is music-related, probably because Dominican music is an interest of both Santana and Espinal. Much of the content provided on the website consists of photos, interviews, recordings of performances, etc. and has attracted the attention of the *merengue tipico* fan community.[42] ESENDOM is also a place where people interested in Dominican cultural events can find information about upcoming concerts, lectures, workshops, film

[42] *Merengue tipico* is a traditional Dominican music genre that is becoming increasingly popular in the U.S.

festivals, etc. The website also featured a short-lived podcast that was relatively successful but ultimately ended when Santana started graduate school and had less time to devote to the website.

Sustaining a worldwide audience, most users come from the Dominican Republic, the U.S., and Spain—however, they also have a presence in Brazil, India, and Japan. Like ThatsDominican, ESENDOM's audience is made up of mostly bilingual and Spanish-speakers. However, unlike ThatsDominican, ESENDOM also has English-only speakers within their audience. The website is set up to be non-Spanish speaker friendly: stories are written in both Spanish and English, it offers limited English-only content, and (as most of the audiovisual content is music related) one does not need to speak Spanish to appreciate much of the website's content (see Figure 3.7 below).

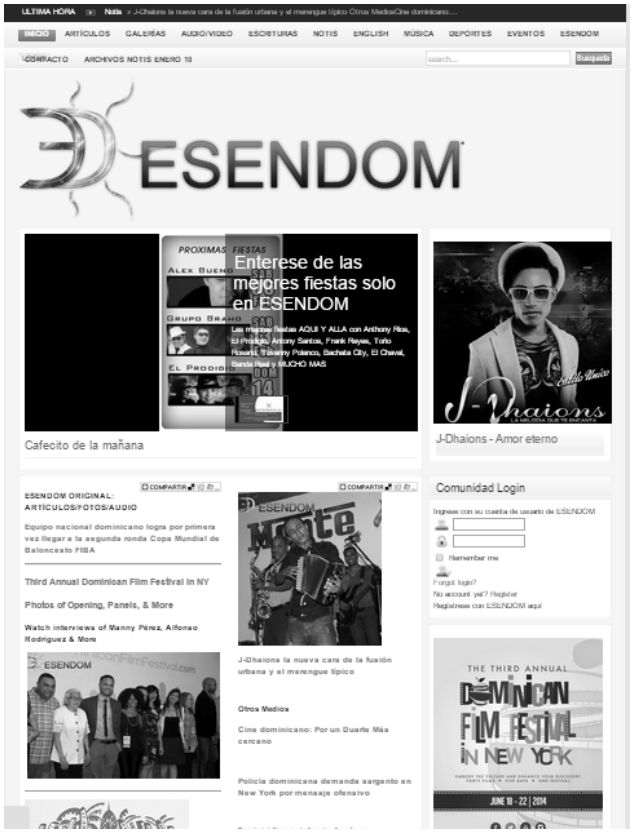

Figure 3.7: ESENDOM's hompage

What is unique about ESENDOM is that it has an offline presence within the New York City Dominican community. Most of the feedback the producers have received from their audience has been in person (as opposed to a string of comments at the end of an article or video). Visitors who frequent the site share their appreciation for ESENDOM directly to Santana and Espinal and use it as a source to engage with the various currents within which *dominicanidad* is being expressed and experienced in New York City. While they do not have the visible interactive virtual community of websites like ThatsDominican, they nonetheless have endeavored to be a hub for the various

ways *dominicanidad* is expressed and have made connections with many Dominican public figures (media representative, musicians, celebrities, etc.). The positive reception ESENDOM has received over its tenure is reflected in the exclusive music content it is given by artists and interviews and event coverage that would not be available to other media representatives. The result of this is a cultivation of a community of New York City cultural figures. This is not a community in the sense that large numbers of members are participating in active engagement and interaction within the space of new media technologies. As such it would be easy to write-off ESENDOM as relatively insignificant, as a minnow in the vast online ocean. Furthermore, their content is clearly influenced by the advanced academic background of its creators, potentially making it less accessible. However, as the Dominican community in New York City becomes more established and their numbers continue to grow, a forum that highlights the vibrancy of Dominican cultural life in New York City and provides intellectual conversations becomes all the more relevant.

It is important to note that ESENDOM bridges the online and offline worlds in ways that the other websites I surveyed do/cannot. Similar to Sally J. McMillan and Margaret Morrison's (2006) study of the internet's role among college students, "the line separating real and virtual communities is often fluid and permeable" (82). Moreover, there is often a connection between online communities and the "real" communities within which people live, work, and play; the internet regularly serves as a

technological conduit between the virtual and non-virtual worlds. McMillan and Morrison contend, "Even though the internet was often used for sustaining real communities, community-building was not bound by geography or by a sense of only relationships with an offline component were valid" (84). Websites that engage audiences in both online and offline capacities demonstrate that there is often an ambiguous and porous distinction between notions of community as bounded localities and those situated in a digital space. Ultimately, McMillan and Morrison found that the participants in their study conceived of the internet in a somewhat contradictory fashion: the realms of online and offline were separate but at the same time interconnected and therefore mutually dependent. Online communities, and the process of self-making and identity expression that they facilitate, require internet users to be flexible and hybridize their understanding of community as a concept. And as individuals oscillate between the "virtual" and the "real" worlds, they engage in an active process of identity negotiation.

As a small media start-up, ESENDOM does not have the reach or audience numbers that ThatsDominican generates. What it has instead is a trajectory towards more traditional and mainstream exposure. Santana and Espinal are not interested in sustaining a platform that's main influence in the Dominican mediascape is its ability to churn out viral video content. According to Santana:

> The ESENDOM that exists is a very small portrait of the ESENDOM I envision. I want more. I want to provide more. In the beginning we posted links to

> Dominican-related articles from other media, original articles, original interviews, photos, and videos. ESENDOM went through different phases and I do not want the "shell" of ESENDOM that exists today to be the only thing the audience knows/experience. Once I finish grad school, I would like to return to this project and make ESENDOM a place that empowers its audience (personal correspondence).

The optimism of its co-founders, rooted in the upward-mobility of segments of the U.S. Dominican community through higher education and business ownership, might not be pure idealism. While there is no denying that Dominicans/Dominican-Americans face U.S. mediated invisibility, the alternative ideological discourses that are cultivated in spaces like ESENDOM have the potential to translate into more widespread and even mainstream media exposure.

DR1.com

When compared to the other two websites, DR1.com has a dated "web 1.0" feel to it. It is primarily text based, functions mostly as a forum posting hub, and its audience seems to be different from those of both ThatsDominican and ESENDOM. It is also the only one of the three websites for which I was unable to interview a representative—the website itself makes it difficult to locate individuals involved with its creation and production of the website and was generally unresponsive to my inquires through their general contact system. Touting themselves as "The Dominican Republic's #1 English language website for News and Information," the site brings in a wide variety of participants. From ex-patriots in search of news from the island to non-

Dominicans who dream of retiring or vacationing in the Dominican Republic, the site has a different tone and overall mission than the other two. It is also the longest running; founded in 1996, DR1 seems to have changed very little in look or purpose (see Figures 3.8 and 3.9).

Figure 3.8: DR1's hompage

Figure 3.9: Sample discussion thread

The structure of DR1 is very straightforward: site administrators provide general interest topics on a range of interests in the Dominican Republic (travel, legal, business, etc.) and moderators monitor participant initiated and directed forum discussions. The forums cover a wide range of topics, but most of them are concerned with asking for

and sharing advice on the logistics of moving to the island (for example there is a particularly lengthy discussion thread on transitioning to the patchy Dominican utilities infrastructure) and the difficulties of adjusting to the cultural and social climate of the island after living in the U.S. or other places abroad. As reported by the website:

> DR1 receives more than 16,000+ unique visitors per day, 5,000,000+ visitors per year, making it the most visited and most popular site in English language for the Dominican Republic. We have the highest search engine rankings and saturation of any Dominican Republic related website. In addition to our search rankings, we are linked to by thousands of websites. This makes DR1 the most visible and linked Dominican Republic related website on the Internet (DR1.com).

According to Figure 3.10 below, which is a demographic breakdown used to attract advertisers to buy advertising space on the website, DR1 sees their audience as primarily U.S. and Dominican based.

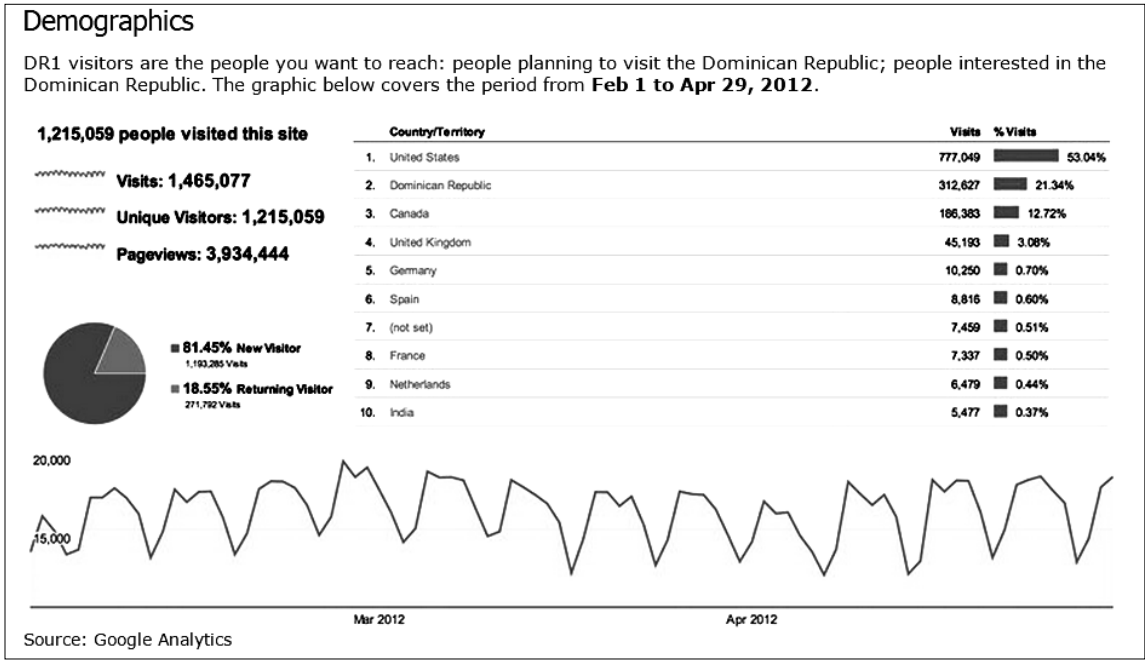

Figure 3.10: Demographics as reported by DR1 on their website

However, unlike the other websites discussed in this chapter, the participants are not seeking to re-connect or necessarily maintain a sense of community with family and friends in the Dominican Republic. In a discussion appearing on topix.com about the nature of the racialized/racist language on the site, one poster explained, "DR1 is mostly a EX PAT website, half of the people on there are upper class Dominicans or white ex pats from america [sic] and most of the website is business for hotels and restruants [sic]." The website has cultivated an engaged and active community, but one that is comprised of wealthy Dominicans (both Diasporic and second/third generation) who wish to return to the country of their parents/grandparents and mostly white non-Dominicans from North America and Europe who hope to retire or vacation in the Dominican Republic. The marked class difference from the previous two websites might explain DR1's simplistic design. Unlike the creative producers of ESENDOM and ThatsDominican—Dominican/Dominican-Americans who are interested in expressing and celebrating Dominican culture in the U.S.—DR1 operates as a locus for those who are not intimately familiar with Dominican infrastructure, culture, and economy.

In addition to sustaining a different audience, DR1's design points to a community that is less entrenched in new media developments. While the website does have both a Facebook page and a Twitter account, there has been no activity on either since 2011 and, before that, very little. It is in the website's forums that current and frequent activity can be seen. This points to a less technologically advanced audience,

maybe a sign of an older audience—younger generations tend to be more adept and engaged with the most up-to-date new media technology and platforms—whose digital participation is limited to more traditional forms of internet interactions (i.e. the use of internet forums).

Another marker of class difference can be seen in the racially loaded discussions occurring in the DR1's forums. Many participants on DR1's forums and discussion threads that appear on other websites (like topix.com or hobotraveler.com for example) frequently accuse DR1 posters of racism, anti-Haitianism, and other types of derisive attitudes toward people of African descent. Therefore, while the majority in this online community are merely conforming to ideologies of the inferiority of those of African descent—be they Afro-Dominican, Haitian, or African-American—others on the site call out this type of thinking. Those critical of the racialized discourses appearing in the DR1 forums both directly confront racist/racialized comments in the discussion threads on the website and/or express their oppositional point of view on other websites that foster participant posting and discussion. DR1 itself, while very much a community that sustains a certain *dominicanidad*, does not challenge traditional Dominican *or* U.S.-based racial ideologies. It is outsiders, those familiar with the website but not aligned with it, who are engaging with the type of counterhegemonic and oppositional discourses seen on ESENDOM and ThatsDominican.

However, of the three websites, DR1 has built the most sustained "online community." The site has a large number of frequent posters who regularly interact with each other in the forums, know each other, are familiar with each other's stories and background, and have cultivated digital relationships (acquaintanceships, friendships, rivalries, etc.) with other active forum participants. In a discussion thread about the nature of the group, a few posters new to the site complain about the way the established members of the forum dismiss much of what they have to say. In response to this, one frequent forum participant tells them:

> I think because a good majority of those on this board have been here for quite a while, so sometimes the attitude will be more of a 'been there, done that' attitude. I believe though most here just want to help people through their own trial and errors. May not seem like that but between the lines that is the way it was meant.

A comment that appears later on demonstrates not only the interconnectedness of the site's participants but the investment they put into sustaining DR1 as a community. After reading through some of the posts that spurred the original complaint about the website, this member chastises the original poster's intentions in the Dominican Republic and explicitly engages with them in blunt terms:

> Sorry, I can see why a lot of persons might have made nasty comments. You probably deserved them. Look. You want to come here and screw the women? Fine, no problem. Just don't ask us to finance the trip. Now I will tell you something. You are a prime target for ending up in a cane field with your nuts cut off and your wiener stuck into your mouth. ..... Alone, ignorant, looking for strange women in one of the cesspools of the DR??? And cheap on the side? Seems to me, (and I would welcome contrary comments) that this is a wreck waiting to happen.

This type of exchange is common in DR1's discussion forums, and speaks to the ways in which members self-police the community. Looking specifically at the discursive exchanges that occur on countless websites, Laura Robinson (2007) says "Each time a user posts to a forum or chat room, he [sic] conducts a performance" (105-106). This performance must conform to the expectations of the online community with which they share membership. Members of online communities—a membership that necessitates the construction of a cyberself that can be performed discursively—can successfully maintain that membership by performing "self-identities that do not violate the context of community interaction; these may be read through screen names, member biographies, introductions and the contexts in which conversations take place" (Robinson 2007: 106). It appears that it is this type of discursive performance of online community membership that explains many of DR1's numerous discussion threads.

DR1 best resembles the types of online communities that other new media scholars have discussed, or what can be thought of as a more "traditional" type of online community. An "alternative ideological space" it is not. However, through comparison, DR1 does confirm the radical potential of websites like ThatsDominican and ESENDOM to serve as spaces where ideological ruptures can and do occur.

CONCLUSION: ONLINE IDENTITIES AND MEDIATED COMMUNITIES

What I am interested in here is not necessarily the role of new media in the creation and distribution of media content per se. Rather, what is important to recognize about new media is that it has created an interactive space where discourses concerning numerous ideological paradigms can be negotiated, re-articulated, and contested. While the economic and industrial potential of new media for marginalized groups has much growing to do, new media spaces as forums for discursive exchange are creating unprecedented openings for ruptures in mainstream ideological frameworks. Furthermore, these online spaces have been able to connect people across borders and barriers that previously isolated them. Concerning diasporic communities, in particular, internet spaces have worked to create new mediascapes and sustain already established ones.

Lisa Nakamura (2008) explains the nature of internet research well when she writes, "The Net is, like other media, a reflection of the cultural imagination. It is a hybrid medium that is collectively authored, synchronous, interactive, and subject to constant revision…it is particularly sensitive to the shifting figurations of race, and thus a good place to look to see how race is enacted and performed" (530). Online spaces offer the opportunity for some to expand how and by what means they express identity based on the particularities of the website—a website's purpose, design, and audience all contribute to how this expansion of identity expression is facilitated. Katie Davis

(2011) argues that not only do "people typically try to integrate their online and offline self-expressions," but "the interpretation of online identities often depends on knowledge of certain offline contexts" (647). This is why it is so essential to combine both online and offline research methods when examining online communities (or even vice versa). Similarly, Helen Kennedy (2006) argues, "online identities are often continuous with offline selves, not reconfigured versions of subjectivities in real life; for this reason it is necessary to go *beyond* internet identities, to look at offline contexts of online selves, in order to comprehend virtual life fully" (861). Here Kennedy positions herself as another proponent of pairing the exploration of online identity with the everyday offline expressions of self. Because offline identities are such a key component of how one constructs their identity online, Kennedy implores "what is important is to take these conceptual steps without losing sight of identity as embodied experience, of the real struggles of real people whose identities are fiercely contested or defended—in other words, without losing sight of identity-as-practice. This is the real challenge for internet identity research" (873). Kennedy emphasizes the nature of online identity as neither fixed nor fluid. While this argument has been offered by other scholars, she adds a new dimension through the way she articulates the processes of online identity negotiation that recognizes, inherent within the internet as a medium, is a lack of limits, boundaries, and closures as a webpage is a text that never reaches a state of completion, always "under construction." For the researcher, cyberselfs can

only be analyzed if contextualized in relation to the offline self and through some level of cultural familiarity. This is a particularly significant aspect of my scholarship. I do not merely analyze Dominican-centric website content, I do so grounded in the insights garnered from offline fieldwork and participant observation. Each of the three websites I discussed above are approached through this methodological framework; critical and textual analysis of the content (images, discussions, multimedia, etc.) situated within the interpersonal learning process of traditional fieldwork.

The longevity of a website like DR1 does not dispel my claim that the internet provides both alternative ideological spaces and spaces of ideological rupture. Like any aspect of society, parts re-affirm and uphold hegemonically supported ideology and parts contest it. The participants of DR1 are part of an active process of creating and sustaining a type of *dominicanidad* that is rooted in class associations, one that is being resisted and re-negotiated on websites like ThatsDominican and ESENDOM. The point is, unlike the period before the introduction of the internet—when alternative voices and active resistance were more easily silenced and ignored—the cyberspace created by new and developing media technologies open up an opportunity for alternative voices to be expressed and heard and new digital communities to be formed through the desire to resist and re-articulate identities, ideologies, and cultural constructs. What *dominicanidad* is—what it means, how it is expressed, and how it is negotiated and

constituted—is being negotiated within the cyber domain created by ThatsDominican, ESENDOM, DR1, and the many other similar websites that emerge every day.

Conclusion: "*Mi raza es dominicana*": Afro-Caribbean Racial Negotiation as a Unique Lens for Approaching U.S. Racial Hegemony

I never expected to face so much ambivalence towards the term "Dominican-American," but as I talked to Dominican after Dominican in New York City the term seemed to have limited resonance with them. While as a nation we have become accustomed to referring to established immigrant groups along this hyphenated framework (German-American, Jewish-American, Greek-American, etc.), for Dominicans in the U.S. this hyphenated construct represents an assimilation process that, might be standard practice for other immigrant communities, but was incompatible with how they constructed their identities. The term "Dominican-American" was taken up as a way to explain to me their nationality in ways that I, the interviewer, was familiar with. Yet, for them, this is not a moniker that appropriately addressed their identities as Dominicans in the U.S. Of course, some aspects of their identity were easily connected to an "American" sensibility, however, each of these intersections are rooted in a sense of the Dominican imaginary that appears to be uniquely cultivated in this community. Dominican intersectional identity plays with the boundaries of national identity and what that means for Dominicans living in the U.S. and, therefore, makes the negotiation of *dominicanidad* within the U.S. in a state of flux and constant becoming.

Furthermore, Dominicans in the U.S. are positioned within a panethnic Latino umbrella which has the tendency to reduce their cultural specificity and national heritage. Certainly, Dominicans claim a Latino/Hispanic identification; however, this identification is more appropriative or assimilationist than organic. Their association with this identity category is more nuanced than current articulations of "Latino" allow for and results in a desire to qualify where they fit within this panethnic conglomeration. Juan Flores (2009) addresses a similar dilemma in his discussion of (Afro)*Antillanismo*, where he contends that what separates "*caribeños*" (those that situate their identities within the Spanish Caribbean) from Latino pan-ethnicity is blackness and an Afro-Atlantic imaginary. His analysis suggests that as the three countries (Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic) engage with U.S. notions of blackness, nationally constructed racial ideologies, and constructions of race articulated through pan-Caribbean/Antillean discourses, each are faced with very real and persisting challenges to how they fashion their national identities. This is a critical component to what is going on in the New York City Dominican community but does not fully represent the complexities of current identity negotiations. From the themes that have emerged over the course of my dissertation research, I am able to identify some of these particularities of Dominican construction of self within the U.S. that have been poorly accounted for in the academic literature.

This conclusion, therefore, attempts to re-center *dominicanidad* as it is understood by Dominicans living in the U.S. Clearly the media has a role in both negotiations of *dominicanidad* and Dominican-American expressions of it. However, it is through the voices of my interviewees, Dominicans living in New York City whose everyday lived realities are embedded within a U.S.-fashioned *dominicanidad*, that the real discursive work of identity struggle can be best illuminated. Not through the limited glimpses at Dominican subjectivity in U.S. mainstream media, nor through the range of Dominican-centric websites that are created and propelled by U.S. Dominicans who are attempting to self-represent, can one truly start to understand Dominican-American *dominicanidad*. It is instead on the individual level that such an abstract notion can even begin to be conveyed. This dissertation is a testament to the complex and problematic ways in which media attempt to engage with discourses of identity. Yet it was not until I heard the voices of my interviewees that I really started to conceptualize Dominican-American *dominicanidad* outside of the discursive frameworks that I unwittingly carried with me into the field. Through living their lives, Dominicans in the U.S. actively contest hegemonic paradigms that deem to label, categorize, and neatly situated them within ideologies that are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain themselves. Consequently, I conclude this study with a discussion of those themes of the Dominican experience in the U.S. most salient among the New York City Dominicans who are living them.

RETHINKING THE DOMINICAN RELATIONSHIP WITH BLACKNESS

While not the only reason she was criticized for not authentically representing *dominicanidad*, the fact that Zoe Saldana has been cast as Black/African American in so many of her film roles suggests a certain racialized component within the Dominican-American audience reception of her star text. There is no denying that many of the critiques levied against her by my interviewees and by online posters are ones that a lighter skinned Dominican-American would not have received. For example, even though both Saldana and Alex Rodriguez are chastised for being overly "Americanized," race is only brought up in relation to Saldana. While the claim that Rodriguez has "Americanized" implicitly suggests that he has white-washed his image and is therefore seen as "wanting to be white," it was only in people's discussions of Saldana that race was explicitly addressed. Ultimately, what this speaks to is the contentious relationship between blackness and *dominicanidad* that is rooted in Dominican history and its hostile relationship with African descent.

For Tina, "when Dominicans say they are not Black they mean that they are not 'African American,' not that they are not of African descent." When Saldana plays African American characters she is accused of not being Dominican enough by the Dominican-American community, even if this reasoning is cultivated on an unconscious level. What this ultimately illustrates is the conflicted relationship between

dominicanidad and blackness that is playing out through Dominican media reception in the U.S.

Many scholars, including myself, have reduced Dominican racial identification as a process of denial; where Dominicans are seen as refusing to acknowledge their seemingly obvious African descent. And while I hold that this is an observable truth, it is, nonetheless, a partial truth. For Dominicans in the U.S. who are exposed to the academic discourse that labels them as racial deniers, a true desire to re-articulate this phenomenon through their own framework is widely shared. Suggesting that Dominicans reject their blackness is an over-simplification of a system of racial thinking that is based in notions of *mestizaje* and the blending of separate heritages. During an interview that truly shifted my perspective on Dominican racialized thinking, Luis asked me "why should we claim one part of our racial heritage at the cost of ignoring the others?" For Luis, he is not denying the existence of blackness within his *dominicanidad*, but its centrality. Even while analyzing the conflicting constructions of racialization between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, I was falling victim to U.S.-based hegemonic notions of blackness rooted in the logics of the one-drop rule. It is all too easy for U.S. academics to read the body and identify it as Black and to subsequently fault those who do not read their own bodies the same way as rejecting the obvious. However, this way of thinking is grounded in a logic that positions race as a biological property, a way of thinking that is not articulated in the same way in the Dominican

Republic. In order to step out of this mindset, I will use the interviews of two Dominicans living in New York City to attempt to re-situate this discourse in a way that is not tainted by my own racialized dispositions.

Luis, a U.S.-born Dominican in his late twenties, insisted that the argument claiming that Dominicans have historically denied their African descent is an insufficient way to describe what is going on. He says that while it might not look like it to outsiders who observe culture on the island, you can, nevertheless, see the influence of African heritage in Dominican culture. He says that in the Dominican Republic they view blackness differently than what is commonly represented in the U.S. and that it is actually celebrated through Dominican cultural expression. "We do embrace it," he said of the African cultural heritage of the island. Suggesting that the way the Dominican Republic is represented by others connotes African descent as its primary ethnoracial lineage, Luis instead argues that the Dominican Republic is, in fact, a more true version of the way the U.S. mythically characterizes itself: a melting pot. "You live through it almost every day, and we joke about it. It is not that we don't highlight it, it is just part of who we are as much as the European and Indian…We can't disentangle one part from the others." For Luis, to say that he was of African descent simply was not completely accurate, just as if he were to say he was of Indigenous descent. He is all these things at once.

When interviewing Emmanuel, who was a Dominican-born member of the U.S. army, I found a similar sentiment being expressed. When discussing the *Black in Latin America* (PBS, 2011) series produced by Henry Louis Gates, he was very critical of it, saying "It was a travesty. As least when it came to the Dominican Republic. It didn't help Dominicans to be explained to the general public because they showed us as denying our African heritage. But there is nothing to deny. What we have done is reinvented something new." He was offended by the manner in which the series represented Dominicans as deniers of their blackness. He said that "we do not deny it, we have re-invented a new thing that is Dominican and it goes way beyond that." He wanted to defend Dominican racialized thinking as not a mindset but an evolving process of identification that reflects both current and historical realities of Dominican identity. Emmanuel saw the identifier "Dominican" as already connoting African descent and therefore it was both redundant and unrepresentative to claim blackness as well.

Both Emmanuel and Luis, through their criticism of the discourses that label Dominicans as racial deniers, insist on an alternative identity paradigm, a paradigm that is not beholden to erroneous conceptualizations of race as biologically determined in a way that makes any degree of African descent the deciding racial factor. Just as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's (1994) expose the ways in which critiques of Eurocentrism work to, ironically, re-center it, by insisting that blackness be central to the discussion of

Dominican ethnoracial reality merely obscures the fact that what is occurring through these criticisms is a re-hashing of the biological determinism critical race theorists have fought so hard to discredit.

A Dominican Paradigm of Identity Negotiation

Representational concerns and the importance of "authentic" *dominicanidad* dominated the Dominican reception to MTV's *Washington Heights*; however, it seems that the show's primary failure was its inability to translate *dominicanidad* as a paradigm of identification within the network's identity project entrenched in U.S. normative frameworks of identification. While as Diego expressed to me, "the ideal Dominican-American is from the Heights for most people," the show was unable to convey that Dominican-American-ness both televisually and discursively. Instead of reflecting the fluidity of identity characteristic of the Dominican imaginary, *Washington Heights* labored to root its cast members geographically. This process of tethering Dominican-Americans to the neighborhood of Washington Heights essentially detaches its residents from the diaspora and the imaginary that is central to how they construct their subjectivities.

No one is saying that being a Dominican in New York City is the same as being a Dominican in the Dominican Republic. Yet the same could be said about a Dominican in Santo Domingo versus one in Santiago. A vibrant and growing immigrant community,

Dominicans in the U.S. position their notions of self firmly within an understanding of a Dominican imaginary. This nationally aligned imaginary is not a geographic one but a sensibility that grounds their construction of self through connections to Dominican culture and worldview. Furthermore, Dominicans reject U.S.-based frameworks of identification insisting that they should not have to conform or assimilate to pre-existing U.S. ideologies concerning their race, ethnicity, class, etc. Staking a claim for the right to uniquely identify themselves outside of these paradigms, Dominicans in the U.S. resist placing themselves within the established and institutionalized White/Black dichotomy and instead continue to hold on tight to those paradigms that resonate with them. That is not to say that Dominicans in the U.S. merely replicate ideologies from the island, but they position these ideologies in conversation with those in the U.S. in order to negotiate more situated notions of self.

Based in a society that reads race onto the body in White/Black binary terms, the U.S. racial landscape was frequently brought up during my interviews and often taken to task by those I spoke with. For example, Junior told me "Being Dominican is all about the way you act and you speak, it is not really about how you look, anyone can be Dominican." What this young man meant was that there is no one standard Dominican "look" and that people would not be able to identify someone's Dominican heritage through reading the body. Almost everyone I interviewed mentioned the difficulty non-Dominican groups had in easily identifying them as a certain racial or ethnic category,

but among Dominicans their identity was never ambiguous at all. Similar to Mary Beltrán's (2009) concept of "cultural racialization"—a process through which an individual is ethnoracialized based on perceived cultural factors—Dominicans identify cultural characteristics in other Dominicans in order to recognize them as part of their in-group. Dominican audiences of *Washington Heights* desperately searched for these instances of cultural racialization, elements that could be recognized as representative of *dominicanidad*. Most people agreed with Ciel, who told me she "just wished the show had more Dominican culture."

The most important of these characteristics is the speaking of Dominican-Spanish. Different from what has become a standardized Spanish variant in the Spanish-language media, Dominican-Spanish has its own speed, syntax, and slang. When combined with accent, the speaking of Dominican-Spanish provides a salient way to identify others as Dominican. And in this community that has prioritized cultural retention, speaking this type of Spanish is crucial to that retention. Tina, when discussing the reasons she thought *Washington Heights* inadequately represented *dominicanidad*, told me, "we don't talk like that, more use of Spanish language among the cast would have made it more authentic." Nearly every single Dominican I met in New York City spoke Spanish fluently regardless of their immigrant generation or fluency with English. It is clear that there is a perception that Dominican culture is inextricably linked to Dominican Spanish in a way that the loss of one will facilitate the

loss of the other. *Washington Heights*, while not generating the same sentiments of disapproval and betrayal that celebrities of Dominican heritage did among my interviewees, embodied the threat of the potential loss of Dominican Spanish among Dominicans living in the U.S.

HYPHENATED IDENTITY, HYPHENATED EXISTENCE: THE NOTION OF BEING BOTH "HERE" AND "THERE"

As an example of the complexity of immigration and the resulting negotiation of a hyphenated identity, Silvia Spitta (1997) describes Cuban, Cuban-American, and "hyphenated" conceptualizations of identity. Seeing Cuban-American positionality as one that is split between the "there" and the "here," Spitta contends that Cuban-Americans "theorize Cuba and the Caribbean from the hyphen that both connects the Cuban to the 'American' and separates the Cuban from the 'American'" (164). Ultimately, Spitta suggests that those living in the space of the hyphen have constructed two distinct, yet overlapping, modes of conceptualizing the border, one that is oppositional, explosive, and politically engaged and one that internalizes the border. Subsequently, the border comes to represent both a "cheek-to-cheek" choreographed dance as well as a war zone. While not identical to the tension the hyphen creates between the Dominican and the American, such examples of the impact of hyphenated identity ring true for many of the interviews that have made up the core of this

dissertation. Furthermore, it is through the sustaining of online communities that many Dominicans in the U.S. negotiate their experience with hyphenated subjectivity.

Dominican-Americans maintain a sense of being two places at once: both "here" and "there." This might not be a unique phenomenon to Dominicans in the U.S., as many other immigrant communities have shared similar sentiments; however, I would argue that Dominicans even into the second and third immigrant generations sustain a strong connection to the island in a way that is unique to their community. Facilitated by ever advancing communication technology, frequent return visits, and the concentration of culture obliged by an enclave reality, Dominicans in the U.S. have avoided the traditional assimilation path that most U.S. immigrant groups have followed. Instead, Dominican-Americans not only have what has been called a "hyphenated identity," but a hyphenated existence. The extremity of this I found in those who even had reservations with the "Dominican-American" identification, opting to identify themselves as simply "Dominican." Luis asked me "Is it really indicative of the actual Dominican experience?" This seemed unusual of those who were born and raised in the U.S., to identify so much with the country of their parents or grandparents to the point that they felt that the place they had lived their entire lives had a less significant role in their construction of self. For many Dominicans, both in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, New York City is just another Dominican city regardless of its actual geographic location. Those living in New York City are able to vote in Dominican

elections, speak Dominican style Spanish, and purchase the same items found on the shelves in the stores on the island. Furthermore, most U.S. Dominicans have family in both countries and sustain close relationships that seem to be unaffected by the physical distance. The result of all these factors is the ability of Dominican-Americans/Dominicans in the U.S. to be present in two places at once.

Often described to me as having two simultaneous identities, Dominicans in the U.S. develop a sensibility that allows them to feel like they are part of both places at once through the sustaining of a shared Dominican imaginary; seeing their U.S. self and their Dominican Republic self as overlapping and intertwined. Emmanuel referenced a lyric by the singer Penot Suaza that he saw as emblematic of the immigrant experience for many groups in the U.S.: "*estoy aqui pero mi menta esta ya* [I am here but my mind is there]." However, for him, this is a thing of the past. He is able to be here and there at the same time. "My mind is here *and* it is there…You are here yeah, but by living here you can actually follow every aspect of Dominican life. Especially through the web." Unlike the experience of Cuban-Americans discussed by Spitta, Dominicans in the U.S. are able to live on and identify with the hyphen and both of its parts simultaneously.

According to my interviewees, as Emmanuel mentions above, engaged internet use plays a significant role in their ability to be both "here" and "there," in regards to Dominican-American experiences of hyphenated identity. For example, Alma told me, she "lives on the island through Facebook." Dania suggested that "websites that use

videos as part of their platform" have a lot of potential to foster a "promising internet Dominican community." Websites like ESENDOM and ThatsDominican in particular are able to both reflect *and* cultivate hyphenated subjectivity as foundational to U.S. *dominicanidad*. Unlike the failure of *Washington Heights* and the celebrities of Dominican heritage discussed by interviewees to translate *dominicanidad* in a salient and authentic fashion for Dominicans in the U.S., online spaces are not beholden to a mainstream audience or the barriers to access that work to exclude alternative positionalities from more traditional media industries. It is in cyberspace that *dominicanidad* can be represented in congruence with the Dominican imaginary and reflect the complex relationship between "here" and "there."

IMPLICATIONS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Dominicans in the U.S, whether they identify as Dominican-American or not, whether they associate with blackness or *latinidad*, or if they are just lost in the maelstrom of transcultural ethnoracial identity negotiation, serve as a critical interjection into the ways in which discourses and the ideologies they support are understood. Through connecting to a Dominican imaginary that is partially constituted and substantiated through media, *dominicanidad* is articulated on an individual basis and is therefore almost impossible to generalize into a presentable form. However, the conventions of academia and my own position as the researcher invested in the

potential of *dominicanidad* to serve as a critical interjection into the ways in which ethnoracial discourses are conceptualized and explored in both the academic and popular realms forces me to, nevertheless, endeavor to interpret the breadth of research I have presented thus far. Therefore, I will conclude with what I see are the most important contributions sustained by this research: (1) the limitations of "authentic" representations of *dominicanidad* within U.S. media due to the inadequacies of framing ethnoracial discourses to accommodate for U.S. Dominicans, (2) the productive tensions produced through hyphenated expressions of identity that reveal, through the media that try to explain them, the ability to sustain a complex, fluid, and conflicting Dominican identity, and (3) the influence of hegemonic ethnoracial constructs that force Dominicans in the U.S. to articulate the non-articulable, to explain the unexplainable, and demonstrate the non-demonstrable.

As exhibited through my examination of the criticisms levied towards Zoe Saldana and Alex Rodriguez as "inauthentic" representatives of *dominicanidad* as well as through the review of the audience reception to MTV's *Washington Heights* that suggested the show's representation of *dominicanidad* was unrecognizable to most Dominicans living in the U.S., I propose that U.S. mainstream media is fundamentally ill-equipped to include articulations of *dominicanidad*. Preventing the seamless introduction of Dominican subjectivities to a mass mainstream audience are the ideological frameworks that constitute the meaning-making abilities of the media as a

sociohistorical institution in the U.S. Through its contradiction with dominant U.S. ethnoracial paradigms, *dominicanidad* can only be precariously placed within what is imagined as "American" and must be, consequently, diluted into a palatable form. However, the resilience of the Dominican community in the U.S. to demand their mediated acknowledgment is poised to combat how race and ethnicity are understood in this country.

Furthermore, as has long been argued by intersectionality scholars, identity as a social force is not easily anchored nor is it a simple process of categorization. The question of "What is Dominican/*dominicanidad*" is not a game of arbitrary semantics, it is a *process* that utilizes media spaces as the arena for its struggle. In the internet era, cyberspace provides that outlet for arbitrations, expressions, and articulations of *dominicanidad* by those both invested in its legitimacy and those who would like to keep it ignored. The Dominican-centric websites I have discussed in this dissertation along with the various online discussion forums I have referenced throughout demonstrate the significance of the internet as a discursive terrain.

Finally, what this research speaks to is the difficulty of navigating ideological frameworks that thrive on the eradication and de-legitimization of *dominicanidad* as an alternative paradigm of identification. Dominicans, invested in the preservation of their connections to a Dominican imaginary, are forced to contend with a level of critical self-awareness that most of us never have to consider. They cannot merely abandon

Dominican-centric cultural signification, as that would cut their ties with the Dominican imaginary they so desperately want to conserve. Yet, on the other hand, they can also not simply ignore the structures ingrained in U.S. institutions that continue to uphold ideologies of white supremacy which work to discredit their culture and language, limit their opportunities for success, and emphasize their Otherness in the pursuit of maintaining the status quo. As I attempt to make sense of these various battles, something Emmanuel said to me continues to return to my mind: "You in America might not know we are here…yet. But soon we will make ourselves known, we will have our day." It seems like we will just have to watch and see.

Appendix A: List of Quoted Interviewees

Alma—Interview conducted on July 20, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. This woman in her early twenties was born in the DR but moved to the U.S. at age 4. She had tan skin and could easily be categorized as Latina/Hispanic in the U.S. and would be considered *indio* (a category demarcating brownness in the skin that is culturally contributed to indigenous ancestry and not African) in the DR.

Ana—Interview conducted on June 18, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. In her early twenties, this woman was born in the DR and had only been in the U.S. for 6 years. With medium brown skin and African textured hair, she would easily be considered African American in the U.S. and *merena* (having medium to dark brown skin tone but not being interpreted as *negra*/"Black," usually only Haitians or Haitian-Dominicans are considered *negra*) or even *negra* in some contexts (this would be dependent on class connotations whether she might be considered the more favorable *merena* over *negra*) in the DR.

Carmen—Interview conducted on July 10, 2013 at the CUNY DSI office. She was born and raised in the U.S. of Dominican-born parents. She was in her late twenties and was the lightest skinned of my interviewees. In the U.S. she could pass as white for most people and in the DR she would be considered *blanca* (a category that demarcates light skin tone but does not mean "white" necessarily, but having primarily Spanish descent).

Ciel—Interview conducted on June 10, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. In her mid-twenties, she was born in the U.S. of Dominican parents. She had a light tan skin tone and would have been interpreted as Latina/Hispanic in the U.S. and *india clara* (light *indio*) or even *blanca* in the DR.

Dania—Interview conducted on June 11, 2013 in a Washington Heights empanada shop. This 21 year old woman was born in the DR and moved to the U.S. at age 11. She had a medium brown skin tone as well as untreated African textured hair and would easily be considered African American in the U.S. and *morena* in the DR.

Diego—Interview conducted on July 11, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. Now in his late twenties, he was born in the DR but moved to the U.S. when he was 9 months old. His tan skin tone would place him as Latino/Hispanic in the U.S., yet his more African textured hair would make him *indio* or even *indio oscuro* (dark *indio*) in the DR.

Emmanuel—Interview conducted on June 6, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. A man in his early thirties, he was born in the DR and moved to the U.S. when he was 18. He secured his U.S. citizenship through service in the U.S. military. Light-skinned, in the U.S. he would be interpreted as light skinned Latino/Hispanic and in the DR would be categorized as *indio claro* or *blanco*.

Gabriela—Interview conducted on June 7, 2013 in a food court of the City College of New York's North Academic Center. A Dominican-born dual U.S. and Dominican citizen in her mid-twenties, she moved to the U.S. at the age of 13. A light-skinned woman who had African textured hair, she would have been interpreted as light-skinned African American in U.S. but *indio* or *indio clara* in the DR.

Junior—Interview conducted on June 7, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. This man in his late twenties was U.S-born of Dominican parents. With his tan complexion he would be considered Latino/Hispanic in the U.S. and *indio* in the DR.

Leta—Interview conducted on June 5, 2013 in a food court of the City College of New York's North Academic Center. This 18 year old teenager was born in the DR but moved to the U.S. when she was 3 years old. Dark tan with processed African textured hair, in the U.S. she would have been read as either light-skinned African American or dark-skinned Latina/Hispanic. In the DR she would be considered *indio*, *indio oscura*, or *merena*.

Luis—Interview conducted on June 11, 2013 at the CUNY Dominican Studies Library. He was born in the U.S. of Dominican parents. With tan skin and green eyes he would be considered in the U.S. Latino/Hispanic and *indio claro* in the DR.

Tina—Interview conducted on July 18, 2013 outside the City College of New York's North Academic Center. This woman in her early twenties was the first of her family to be born in the U.S., but her older brother was born in the DR before her parents moved to the U.S. Her medium brown skin tone and African textured hair means that in the U.S. she would be interpreted as African American and in the DR she would be considered *indio* or *merena*.

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